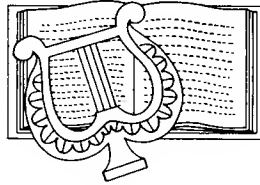


THE YOUNG GUARD



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THE BOULEVARD NOVELS.

THE YOUNG GUARD,

A PICTURE OF PARIS MORALS AND MANNERS.

Uniform with the present Volume.

NANA'S DAUGHTER;

A STORY OF PARISIAN LIFE.

By ALFRED SIRVEN AND HENRI LEVERDIER.

WITH A LETTER FROM THE AUTHORS TO M. EMILE ZOLA.

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THE BOULEVARD NOVELS.

II.

THE YOUNG GUARD,

A PICTURE OF
PARIS MORALS AND MANNERS.

BY

VAST-RICOUARD.

TRANSLATED FROM THE LATEST FRENCH EDITION.



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THE YOUNG GUARD.



CHAPTER I.

“AH, De Méras ! Come in, my dear fellow, and sit down,” said Jarly, lying rather than sitting on his directorial arm-chair, his legs lazily stretched out under a broad desk.

And, continuing aloud the diatribe commenced mentally :

“Ah, my friend, these authors and composers ! There are two or three hundred of them here in Paris who think that we directors have been created and brought into the world solely to listen to their idiotic lucubrations, or to be deafened by their quavers and semi-quavers. I don’t know if my colleagues follow my example, but, for myself, I never read any manuscript ; there, never ! Thank you ! I’ve not the slightest wish to go mad before my time comes ! No, but can you imagine me swallowing all that heap of paper ?”

And he pointed out to Hector an enormous range of pigeon-holes rising from the floor to the ceiling, in which were piled up five or six hundred manuscripts with blue or yellow covers.

“And what has set you so dreadfully against these poor authors ?”

“Oh, two fearful bores, by name Anatole Pipert and Robert Mimès : one, a young librettist, the other a music-

hall maestro. They kept me here nearly an hour trying to persuade me that there was an extraordinary situation in their play. Ah, I am up to them—the situations of your authors! Nine times out of ten, it is the directors whom they have to thank for them. ‘The Beautiful Andalusian,’ my present operetta, it was I who re-wrote it from the first line to the last.”

“The deuce! your collaboration was not happy; the piece has only run twenty nights, and you are playing to half-filled houses.”

“That is the fault of that stick of an Anna Due! Simple ruination! She might be the mother of the whole company! How can you expect the public to interest itself in the loves of this ancient lady and the ‘jeune premier?’ At that age it is no longer passion, it is vice; and, not content with that, she has taken it into her head to lose her voice. Happily, within the last few days, my stage manager has discovered in the chorus a little marvel, Lucie Guépin, yes, a wretched chorus-singer, who after rehearsal was singing a verse for her own amusement, but so prettily, with such ‘go’ and such power of mimicry, that he told me of her. I heard her, to judge for myself. Fetching, my boy; fetching! You must tell me what you think of her.”

Jarly had lost no time in deciding what course to pursue. He was a man of prompt decisions, and as Anna Due had tried to have her own way with him, he had given Lucie four or five full rehearsals, and the next day he was going to put her name across the bills.

After all, people were getting sick of these celebrities who had languished in the arms of two or three generations of actors, and who would persist in coming on the boards and giving off their hoarse ditties from between their scanty teeth. These relics of the past, whose clumsy figures were

only imperfectly hidden by the brilliancy and tinsel of the operetta, had no longer any attraction but for college youths encouraged by their professors in the admiration of the antique. The true public was tired of pre-historic "divas," and Lucie Guépin was barely twenty !

Yet De Méras was sceptically inclined. He, too, had thought to have unearthed an operetta star in the person of Mademoiselle Berthe Pompon, his mistress for the time being, and he frankly owned that he had been taken in like any novice. And although she had made an excellent "début" at the "Renaissance" they had soon to put a stopper on her. She was wrong here, awkward there, vulgar always ; and then, her gestures on the stage were those of an epileptic person, enough to give all the spectators nervous attacks. So much so, that the powder-train of her success resembled those damp fire-works which, after a momentary flash, go out miserably without a report. And yet, De Méras had neglected nothing to give his mistress a good start ; articles in the papers, canvassings at the clubs, everything had been pressed into the service, not to mention her luxurious surroundings, her brilliant turn-outs which had not failed to attract attention round the lake. Well, young as she was, Berthe Pompon no more took than Anna.

"By-the-bye, they say you are giving poor Berthe the sack ? It only wanted that to complete it," said Jarly abruptly.

"And they say truly," answered De Méras calmly. "But the young lady is not so much to be pitied as you seem to think ; my friends at the Mirlitons will soon have consoled her for my loss."

At these words, the impresario's face brightened up in the most singular manner. This separation was an accomplished fact, then ! De Méras was free, perfectly free. If only he should be smitten with Lucie, what a stroke of luck

for the "Folies-Parisiennes" theatre! For, there was no denying it, Hector was the sure bringer of luck, the *mau-Maseotte*, whose love was fortune to women.

"Ah, my dear fellow, you must hear her," cried Jarly. "She is rehearsing. I want your opinion, for you are a connoisseur. Follow me."

He dragged the young man through the labyrinth of passages and staircases which led from the director's room to the iron door connecting the theatre with the stage. After having noiselessly opened the door so as not to draw attention to his presence, he pushed De Méras into the front row of the orchestra stalls. Lucie, her arms bare, her tambourine in her hands, her beautiful brown hair gathered in a chignon on her neck, her hips swaying almost imperceptibly from left to right, and her chest thrown slightly forward, was just attacking her grand "*bolero*."

Her piercing black eyes, protected by their fringe of long lashes, had that look, at once stubborn and gentle, provocative and modest, wanton and ardent, of the Spanish woman. Her legs beautifully moulded, without leanness as without undue fullness, were joined to two feet just large enough to stand on. As for her fingers, which plied the castanettes with all the gitana's boldness, they were tapering, white, and abounding in dainty dimples which tempted the lover's kiss.

"Why, of course," said De Méras, "it's Daniello, the little page in the second act. I had noticed her before; can't she give you a look!"

"Isn't she charming?"

"Wait a moment before deciding finally."

Lucie, very confident, was pouring out with incomparable expression the sonorous notes of the "*bolero*," giving full force to its voluptuous measures. Her voice, like a multi-coloured stream of fire, dispersed itself in the empty theatre,

dashing against the ceiling and the cornices, and descending in a rain of sparkling modulations.

"Very good!" murmured De Méras. "Very sympathetic voice—minute to a marvel—and uncommonly cheeky too, for all her demure little face; very promising!"

"I believe you!" said Jarly eagerly.

Then, standing up, and brandishing his stick towards the stage:

"Take the first act over again, my children, and with a will! won't you?—for the little one!"

A murmur of discontent ran through the groups on the stage, whilst the under-manager, with the help of a scene-shifter, improvised hastily with stools and benches the scenery for the first act.

All the performers were out of temper, replying to their comrades in a uniform and almost unintelligible voice.

"When will you have done speaking in your boots?" cried Jarly impatiently from time to time.

The actor spoken to fell back muttering. What sense was there in having to go over again for this new-comer a part which he knew like a book? The women especially betrayed unmistakable ill-humour, muffled up to their ears, complaining of the draughts of this filthy theatre where they were catching their death. A few of them were coughing mournfully.

In the doubtful light which the narrow windows in the roof and the single gas-jet fastened against the prompter's box threw on the stage, one could see them in the background, sitting on their chairs in a semi-circle, their backs turned ostentatiously on the foot-lights.

It was not only the fact that they were being made to repeat over and over again a piece which they played every evening, which caused this tossing of heads and hostile attitude; over and above all, there was this choice which

Jarly had dared to make, and which was so offensive to them all, of a chorus-singer to double a leading part.

Everyone, even those who had but a line to say, was up in arms. And there were murmurs which the stage manager was obliged from time to time to hush, with a

“Ladies, please ! One cannot hear one’s self speak.”

Douçais, the old comedian of the company, took advantage of the moments of quiet which followed the frequent calls to order, to tell doubtful stories, of which he had a very varied stock, the fruit of twenty years of a strolling player’s life in the provinces.

And there were bursts of laughter directly it was Lucie’s turn to sing, and their jealousy especially overcame them.

One couple only kept aloof ; Merta, the tenor, and Bettina, the second singer. Very friendly were they, and taking no part in the ill-feelings of this life, this happy couple, whom one was constantly coming across flirting in out-of-the-way corners, on the seats in the lobby, in the passages, underneath the set pieces, or in the shadow of the harlequin’s screen.

And well aware too of the advantages of union ; sticking up for one another in the case of a menaced effect, a sentence cut out of a scene, or even a word out of a sentence, and threatening, first one and then the other, to throw up their part if justice was not done to one or other of them ; in one word, spooning each other as actors almost as much as they did as lovers.

And yet the actress was over forty, having given birth some twenty years before to a strapping boy, who, at that moment, was serving his country in the cuirassiers. As for Lucie, quite at home in her manola’s costume, although she was the only lady who had exchanged her ordinary clothes for the low body and short petticoats, she bestowed her attentions solely on the actors during the moments of leisure which her part left her.

She was instinctively aware of all the hatred which her unexpected rise in the world would occasion among the women, and she was too politic to beard the discontented ones, and too good-natured to give herself airs, to cause them humiliation.

Several times, too, she stepped on one side to where a man, closely shaven, of unpretentious appearance, and not belonging to the company, was carrying on a conversation in low tones, at the wings, with Irma Béchart, a school friend of Lucie's.

"Now for the second, my children, and briskly! The concerted pieces only, and then we'll go," cried Jarly, as soon as the first act was over. "Those who haven't got a scene with the Andalusian can go."

There was a general move on the stage, and the iron door slammed several times. The chorus-singers rushed towards the exit.

"Not you, chorus-singers!" shouted the director. "Is it so difficult then to understand? Now then, ladies, let us take the serenade." And he gave out the words himself:

"Oui, dans cette prison charmante,
Où vos geôliers sont vos amants."

A sound of leaves being turned over drowned the orchestra, where the scores spread out on the music-stands showed like white patches in the midst of a medley of soft hats, and the leader gave with the bow of his violin the signal to begin.

Two bars, and then, suddenly, from the back of the stage, was heard Lucie's clear and ardent voice, breathing forth with infinite sweetness the recitative:

"Tout est désert, et l'aube est douce."

which served as the prelude to a duet with the tenor. This time De Méras applauded, Jarly was beaming.

"I was certain you would be pleased with her," he said.

"Besides, it has always been my own especial forte, unearthing talent, and how many have had me only to thank for having brought them out!"

And he added, with conviction :

"You ought to speak at the ministry of this particular find I have made."

"Certainly—in due time," replied De Méras.

"For this reason, that the directorship of the Opera will be vacant before long. And, hang it all, I think that my past history as a director speaks strongly enough in my favour to enable me to send in my application without overweening conceit."

De Méras nodded, but this time without answering.

He had all the directors under his thumb by his connexion with the administration of the "Beaux-Arts ;" friendly as he was with Lorédan Goulot, the minister, intimate with his chief secretary, Dorneval, and on the best of terms with all at the Licensing of Plays office. Now, at any moment, a director may have to fight for his own interests, or, what is worse, may have a crow to pick with the "Beaux-Arts," and therefore it is an advantage to have a friend at court.

So De Méras cultivated these relations, which, besides the importance they gave him, were most useful to his mistresses, whom he was able, were it necessary, to pass on to a director.

As Lucie was just about to begin her grand air :

"Messieurs, que me demandez-vous ?"

a whispering behind him made De Méras look round.

He cast a glance over the dark theatre where the balconies and galleries appeared confusedly covered with their great grey cloths to keep the dust from them during the day, and finally discovered near the private boxes, close together, and hand in hand, a young man and a woman who appeared to him to be pretty, without his being able perfectly to distinguish her features.

"Who is that, there?" he asked of Jarly.

"Oh, no one; some of Lucie Guépin's friends, doubtless, whom she has brought here, to have their opinion."

De Méras listened a moment and caught the following words:

"You know, Armand, I want all your time, all, at least, that you do not devote to business."

"Quite true, Juliette," answered the young man in a bored voice, "but Cardillan does not leave me much leisure. You are aware that he is the head of an important political party, and his position of vice-president of the Chamber loads us with work."

"I am so afraid that you no longer love me."

"What childishness! And then, must I always be reminding you that we are playing a dangerous game for you, and that we have need, both of us, of the greatest prudence in order to conceal our connection from your brother-in-law?"

"Oh, you can rest assured, my dear Armand! My precautions are taken. I have always a good excuse for going out, and, believe me, we have no cause to be uneasy so far as concerns Monsieur Béchart."

De Méras with difficulty controlled a laugh.

"Why, it is Armand Lobel with Madame Béchart, the sister-in-law of the under-secretary of the Beaux-Arts! He seems to me to find this lady's love weigh rather too heavily on him."

"You know the Bécharts?"

"Do I know them! So then, the pretty Juliette has left Doueval. In that case Lorédan Goulot can pack up his traps! Madame Béchart resembles the rats. When she leaves a ministry, you may swear it is going to fall."

The rehearsal had just been concluded with the end of the second act.

"Shall we go on the stage?" asked Jarly.

"Yes, I should like to see the little one close to. You were right, there is something in this child. Just send two or three boxes and a dozen stalls to my club. I will distribute them among all the ancient admirers of youthful charms; there is nothing like your grey-beards to infuse life into the youngsters."

In the corridor he met Armand and Madame Béchart.

"How do?" said he, giving his hand to Lobel.

At the same time he bowed to Juliette, and inquired after her niece Irma.

The young girl was on the stage where she had an office to fulfil; it was she who, each time Lucie came off, threw a shawl over her shoulders.

"She would entrust this task to no other," added Madame Béchart. "And then, everything pertaining to a theatre has an extraordinary attraction for her. Ah! I believe we shall have all our work to prevent her from carrying out her intention of coming out at a music-hall. Fortunately, Monsieur Lobel has been good enough to keep me company. I must have bored him dreadfully."

Lobel protested.

"Well, now I give you back your liberty," she continued, letting go the young man's arm, "but it is understood that you dine to-morrow at Monsieur Béchart's, to take me to see Lucie's 'début' in the evening."

Lobel knitted his brows at this unlooked-for proposal. As he was stammering some awkward excuse for declining the invitation, Hector came to his rescue.

"It is I, madame, who shall have the pleasure of taking possession of my friend, Armand Lobel, to-morrow evening. It was agreed between us yesterday that he was to call for me at my Uncle Béraudy's at half-past eight, so as to give me an excuse for escaping from the bosom of my family. So I can only give him up to you at the cost of being

myself deprived of the sight of your friend, Mademoiselle Guépin's, 'début.'"

Lobel gave De Méras a look of gratitude.

"You see, madame, with the best intentions in the world—" said he.

He did not finish. Lucie, followed by Irma, came up to them.

Jarly introduced the "diva" to De Méras.

She was wreathed in smiles, and brought her shawl with awkward modesty over her bare shoulders, whilst her white and deliciously rounded arms issued from the short puffy sleeves of her costume.

Her breasts, heaving from the excitement of the afternoon's rehearsal, were full, but not unduly so, and by no means out of proportion with the dainty build of the body.

She was nature personified in this little group, with her childish delight, clapping her hands like any school girl, and her charms heightened by the glance from her black eyes, which had something disturbing in it.

"Is my director satisfied?" she asked, with a little modest pout.

"You must not consult my opinion to-day, my child," said Jarly, quickly. "Ask rather De Méras what he thinks of you."

"Oh, don't say I did badly, sir!" she cried, clasping her hands in an attitude of supplication, "it would grieve me so much! I should cry all night, and my eyes would be red for the performance to-morrow."

"Which would be infinitely less pretty than the lovely black which nature has given you," replied Hector. "And since you ask my opinion, I can assure you with perfect sincerity, that you possess something more precious still than your beautiful eyes, and that is talent—and original talent, which is rare. I will add, that if you are to-morrow

what you have been to-day, you will be able to lay claim to one of those successes which mark an epoch in the annals of a theatre."

For a moment she was on the verge of bursting into tears.

"I am so afraid the gentleman is making fun of me," she murmured.

"He!" cried Jarly. "Ha, ha! you don't catch him joking! He is nothing if not outspoken. Ten years have I known him, and never once has he been wrong in his prognostications!"

"I can assure you that I have said what I really think," said De Méras. "Jarly can dismiss his whole company, for henceforth your name alone will be sufficient to fill the bill!"

"Do you hear, Blaiziot?" cried the young girl, her face all smiles again, thanks to the astonishing mobility which allowed her to change suddenly her expression. And she threw herself into the arms of the clean-shaven man, having need of some clasp as a kind of sanction to the happiness with which she was filled.

"Who is that person?" asked De Méras, in an undertone, nettled that Lucie had quitted the hand he had given her, to fall with so much warmth on the neck of a stranger.

Jarly hesitated to reply.

"It is Blaiziot," he murmured finally.

"Her lover?" continued De Méras, in a tone of slight vexation.

"Yes, a lover of passage, a strolling player; it's nothing serious."

CHAPTER II.

SINCE the age of twenty, and he was now thirty-seven, De Méras had lived in the full swing of Parisian fast life.

His father, the descendant of an old family of lawyers, and himself a judge, had died president of the Bordeaux Court, leaving to each of his children—Hector, then in his nineteenth year, by his first wife, and Séverine by his second—two hundred thousand francs, and a house of the value of fifty or sixty thousand. Hector's mother had brought Monsieur de Méras a dowry of two hundred and fifty thousand francs, the whole of which had come back to the young man, whose means at his majority consisted consequently of an income of twenty-two to twenty-three thousand francs, plus the half of the rental of the house in Bordeaux, in all, twenty-five thousand francs a year.

Séverine's fortune was more modest, her mother having married penniless, and having had no prospect of inheriting when she was carried off by peritonitis a few days after her daughter's birth.

Monsieur de Méras had in his will allotted to each of his children their exact share of his property, and confided them to the care of their uncle and guardian, Béraudy, his sister's husband, a widower for many years. He had made special mention of Séverine, whom he begged his brother-in-law to take charge of and educate. Uncle Béraudy had not failed in his task. As soon as she was old enough to go to school he had entrusted his niece to the care of the ladies of

the "Sacré-Cœur," and the young girl did not leave there until she had obtained her teacher's diploma.

But the excellent man had not only been anxious to make of his niece a clever and distinguished woman, he had wished, too, to preserve in her that family affection which so soon becomes weakened when one grows up apart from one's friends. For this reason he had made every effort to bring the brother and sister together as much as possible, in order to strengthen by frequent meetings this natural affection. Séverine doted on her big brother, and on holidays, when she arrived in the Rue de l'Arcade and learned that the dearly loved one was not coming, her tears overflowed, and uncle Béraudy had need of all his coaxings to bring back the smiles to the little girl's face.

But his little sister was not the only one whom this naughty big brother upset. His uncle had to bear his lot in it.

In his love of independence Hector had called for an account of his stewardship directly he was of age, and since then he had never permitted Monsieur Béraudy to interfere in the slightest degree with the management of his affairs.

His friends, all chosen from among the young men in the best position, with the highest titles and the largest means had been not a little astonished, knowing his relatively modest resources, to see him fashioning his way of life on their own. Besides which, he never borrowed! He must be living on his capital then, for one cannot be the lover of the prettiest actresses in Paris without enormous expenses. A few of them even only owed their horse and carriage to their connection with him. And this kind of life had been going on for ten years, with no sign that the end was approaching. He did not play, or at least very little, and usually without winning or losing. And the mistresses who left him, or whom he left, had never anything but good to say of him.

Several of his successors in the hearts of these ladies had tried to worm out of them the secret of this free-masonry which he enjoyed with so much gusto, and they had all replied in singing the praises of his person, his character, and his loyalty. He remained a living riddle, even to those "roués" of Parisian life whom nothing escapes, and who are always "au courant" of all the latest tit-bits of scandal. His latest flame was this Berthe Pompon, who had failed to come off in a Parisian "théâtre de genre," and whom he had at once cast aside, as having thenceforward no attraction for him. And yet she was pretty enough, this fair-haired girl with her black eyes, her bold face, her full bosom and elegant figure.

He had made more than one man jealous the day when, having lifted her up from her low estate, he issued forth with her from their mansion in the Avenue d'Eylau, lolling at her side on the cushions of an elegant landau drawn by a pair of greys worth at least fifteen thousand francs.

And behold, suddenly, after two years of a connection which was to all appearance without a cloud, all was over between them. Hector had taken up his abode again in his chambers on the ground-floor of a house in the Rue Taitbout, keeping only his phaeton, and leaving to the forsaken fair, diamonds, "objets d'art," horses, carriages, and house!

And yet, for all that, there were plenty of people who maintained that the famous twenty-five thousand francs a year were still intact, and the house at Bordeaux free from mortgages!

There was no understanding it!

In his moments of celibacy the libertine bethought him that he had an uncle and a sister, and went to see them pretty frequently.

It was six o'clock when he arrived.

"Uncle, uncle! here is Hector!" cried the young girl,

rushing into Monsieur Béraudy's study, without even kissing her brother, so anxious was she to impart to the old man the joy with which she herself was filled.

But she awaited him in the doorway, her arms stretched out, her face beaming, ready to avenge herself for the self-imposed delay by devouring him with kisses.

He was always the dearly loved big brother of other days, but grown more imposing; and she saw the likeness dimly now in this brilliant man, so "distingué," so flattered, the most remarkable figure, perhaps, amongst all the fashionable youth. And these same absences, so repeated, so long, did they not give a greater value to the few hours which he devoted to her from time to time?

Uncle Béraudy shook the hand which his nephew held out to him, but with less warmth than Séverine.

"Might one dine 'en famille' this evening without disturbing one's hosts?" said De Méras, smiling.

"He asks it!" cried the young girl with a reproachful pout, which contrasted with her great eyes all sparkling with pleasure.

"I will go and see even that some delicacy is added to the menu, to feast the return of the prodigal big brother."

And, casting on her uncle a look full of gentle supplication, which said plainly: "Don't scold my brother!" she rushed off to give her orders in the kitchen.

Alone with Béraudy, De Méras inquired with interest after the old man's health, and, to avoid awkward questions, began all at once to ask about Séverine.

"Do you know, uncle, that little sister is getting a big girl, and a pretty one too?"

"Isn't she?" replied Béraudy, whose rather gloomy face became all at once bright. He adored his niece, and it caused him the most lively satisfaction to hear Séverine's praises.

"For five or six years," continued Hector, "her mouth has not grown, nor her nose; it is only those charming great eyes, which are always getting bigger; one will begin to ask when they are going to stop growing! What a coaxing expression they've got, so artlessly malicious!"

"She has the mind and heart of an angel, your sister!"

"I know it well. And perhaps you have not noticed that her figure is developing superbly; it was no longer a child who opened its arms to me just now, but a woman! Ah, uncle, before six months are over, she will be one of the prettiest marriageable girls in Paris!"

"Talking about marriage," said Monsieur Béraudy with a sigh, "when is yours going to be?"

The uncle had got back to the subject of the nephew rather sooner than the latter had wished, for Séverine had not come back into the study, and her presence always softened the acrimony of his reproaches.

"Oh, I have got plenty of time," said De Méras, for the sake of something to say.

"Time, you say? and you are thirty-seven! Take care, my fine fellow, you will be getting left out in the cold!"

"Ah! uncle, women scare me."

"Those with whom you associate, I don't doubt it; but there is another kind of woman, which has nothing in common with yours; the kind of which your mother was one, your aunt too, and of which your sister will be one."

"I don't deny it, and I don't want to profess to be more sceptical than I really am, but confess, it is difficult to make up one's mind amongst the number! And then, why should I alter my way of life? Never, I swear, was bachelor happier than your nephew."

"I do not doubt that celibacy suits you, and you would be ungrateful if you found fault with it; for although I live with your sister, and am ignorant of, and widely separated

from the world in which you move, still, from time to time, I hear news of it. Thus I have been able to learn that your successes with the fair sex have become every day more celebrated, that you have already given a number of Parisian actresses their first start in the world, and that it was sufficient that you had shown yourself abroad a few times with a pretty girl on your arm to make her the envied of all Paris."

"That is a bit of good fortune for which I cannot account, and for several reasons."

The old man moved uneasily, for what he had to say was not pleasant ; then he continued, determined to go through with it, since he had begun. After all, Hector, as a man, was nothing out of the common. He was a little too strongly built for his height ; he had a fine moustache, certainly, but his mouth was too large, and his nose prominent. As for his eyes, their expression was very shifty. All this hardly went to form what one would call a handsome man. To give him his due, however, one had to confess that his appearance was correctness itself, and that he carried himself elegantly, not to mention the halo of glory which surrounded him, owing to his reputation as a good shot, acquired in two or three successful duels.

Hector gave a half-smile, rather nettled at hearing this singular panegyric of himself. After all, tastes differed, and such as he was, Hector might be as capable as anyone else of captivating women. But what surprised uncle Béraudy was that his nephew was able to find means to satisfy their tastes, generally so costly. How was Hector able, with his twenty-five thousand francs a year, to live in this sumptuous mansion in the Avenue d'Eylau, provided with a crowd of servants, and inhabited by a woman always dressed in the latest fashions, always eager for pleasure, and whose milliner's and dressmaker's bills must mount up to a fabulous

total? Since he did not play—a fact on which his uncle heartily congratulated him—where did Hector get the money indispensable for such a life?

Hector bit his moustache, very much puzzled how to defend himself, easting every moment an uneasy glance towards the door by which Séverine had gone out. “Good gracious, uncle,” he said at last, “allow me to observe that you are hardly qualified to judge what life in Paris is in our days, it is by no means the same as in yours. Besides, I have several irons in the fire, they all bring me in a little; and then my affairs last such a short time; in proof of which I have definitely left the Avenue d’Eylau—”

He stopped suddenly at the beginning of a sentence of whose purport he was utterly ignorant, like a street organ which one has left off turning, and which drags out the last note, without being able to finish the piece. “Well, at any rate, beware of lying tongues, and, I implore you, never allow a justification for falsehood,” concluded uncle Béraudy, seeing his niece re-appear.

Reassured by Séverine’s arrival, Hector recovered all his talkativeness. He did not remain with them long after dinner, forced as he was to be present at the “début” at the “Folies-Parisiennes.” The director had besought him not to fail to be there, and he had given his word. Besides, one of his friends, Armand Lobel, was going to call for him, to accompany him to the theatre.

At the name of Armand Lobel, Séverine had felt herself go crimson, and had turned away her head, arranging some papers on her uncle’s table, so as not to let her confusion appear.

“Who is this friend?” asked the uncle, rather mistrustful of Hector’s acquaintances.

“A very talented fellow,” replied the latter, “and one who will make his way. He is Cardillan’s secretary, and

prepares, so they say, his speeches. He is very much valued by his party, and is certain of a chief secretaryship in the next ministry. He will be a minister himself when he's ten years older."

"Really, Monsieur Lobel has such a brilliant future?" asked the young girl, naively, with rather an unhappy look.

"Do you know him, then?" questioned Béraudy.

"No, uncle—that is to say—I danced several times with him at the last ball you took me to, and he had such a modest air, in the midst of all the fops who surrounded him."

And she added to herself: "He will never deign to notice me! A future minister!"

A servant announced dinner and they went into the dining-room.

It was not only at one ball but two, that Séverine had met Monsieur Armand Lobel, and she did not know why she had tried to deceive her uncle, to whom she had never told but the truth. Yet there was no crime in having waltzed with a young man! It must be that she was not a bad dancer, as he had invited her several times, and it was not her fault if her uncle, who was playing at whist in the next room, had not noticed anything. They had sat next to one another at supper; uncle Béraudy had even stood behind them, and had asked his niece her partner's name, but she could not tell him, as she was ignorant of it then. Ah! she had long remembered their gay cotillon, and the witty conversation with which he had enlivened their resting moments! It was only at the end of the second ball that she had learnt, through a friend, that his name was Armand Lobel. Since that day these two names had remained fixed with extraordinary tenacity in her memory, and, what was more strange and inexplicable to her, the young man's features. And, lo and behold! this partner, whom she had

met by chance, and never expected to see again, was a friend of her brother's, with whom he had made an appointment at his uncle Béraudy's ! Chance brings about singular meetings sometimes.

And why had he, more than another, made an impression on her ? The reason was that, since her years of childhood in the convent, at an age when little girls, for the most part, are wrapped up in dressing their dolls, Séverine had formed a very definite idea of her husband that was to be. The man whom she would love all her life—for she was ignorant of any other measure of love—she would have tall rather than short, fair, with large and expressive blue eyes. His chin must be hidden with a thick beard—a sign of power and strength—his lip covered with a fine silky moustache—a sign of distinction—his carriage elegant, hands and feet not too large but yet masculine. So much for his physique ; as for his qualities of mind, she was no less exacting. He should be a man of character, masterful, and capable of making a name, intelligent, and above all, good-humoured, and of a delicacy which nothing should impair ; so much the better, if in addition to all this, he should possess a little, or even much wit. Well, as far as she had been able to judge in such a short time, Lobel suited, no less in body than in mind, all the required conditions. Even the name of Armand, so sweet and harmonious, was among the five or six with which, in anticipation, she had presented the longed-for ideal.

Séverine, whom the announcement of Lobel's approaching visit had filled with joy, enlivened the dinner with her childish gaiety, and Monsieur Béraudy forgot, thanks to the young sister, the uneasiness which the elder brother caused him. They talked much of the last balls at which Séverine had been present. She made such fun of the silly young men whom she had met there that they laughed almost unceas-

ingly; for all her little reserved and modest air, nothing escaped this sly Séverine, and she sketched the faults or features of a gentleman with charming humour. How she did detest people who were not natural!

Armand Lobel was the only one of her partners whom she spared, and with a reason; his outline was not sketched. And when Hector maliciously asked his sister the cause of this omission: "Since he is your friend," she answered archly, "I cannot speak evil of him. Neither do I think it," she added, blushing.

At a quarter to nine, Armand entered. On seeing Made-moiselle de Méras, who, seized with a sudden timidity, was trying to hide herself behind her brother, Lobel was unable to check a movement of surprise. So this pretty partner, whom he also on his part had twice noticed at balls, had turned up again at Monsieur Béraudy's.

"You are among friends," said De Méras to him, after having introduced him to his uncle and the young girl.

"Yes, indeed," stammered Lobel, "I have met this lady, but I did not know her name. I was not even aware, I assure you, that you had a sister!"

Séverine and Armand remained a few moments quite confused, their eyes cast down, ashamed of this emotion, which neither of them could overcome. De Méras relieved them of their embarrassment, from an interested motive, for it was getting late, and he was anxious to be at the theatre before the curtain rose.

"My dear Lobel," said he, "we are rather in a hurry this evening, so I am going to carry you off at once. You must come and spend some more time with my uncle on another occasion, and at the same time renew your acquaintance with a partner, whom you have not had time, perhaps, to appreciate at the ball, but who is, I can assure you, the tenderest and most devoted little sister."

“I will come again, certainly, if Monsieur Béraudy will allow me,” stammered Armand, respectfully taking leave of the old man.

“You will always be welcome, sir,” replied Monsieur Béraudy, whilst Séverine seized her brother’s head in both her hands.

“Ah, I adore you !” she said, giving him a hearty kiss.

CHAPTER III.

LUCIE GUÉPIN occupied the dressing-room of Anna Duc, whom she had replaced. And very coquettish it was, with its eretonne with a blue ground covering entirely the ceiling and walls, its sofa and low arm-chairs to match the hangings, and its marble toilet-table surmounted by a bevelled mirror with two gas side-lights whose globes of ground glass softened the too vivid glare.

Lucie had taken up her position in front of the lofty cheval-glass, her head with its laughing face gracefully drooping on one side, her bosom firm, her chest thrown forward, and her hands resting on her hips as if better to hold in the pointed costume which encased her shapely figure. The expression on her face was ever-changing; now, her eyes modestly cast down seemed to indicate a coy modesty; now, her pouting lips betrayed a slight annoyance, only to be succeeded by a charming smile which disclosed a row of white teeth.

When she was satisfied that she had sufficiently practised these effects before appearing in the presence of the public, the "débutante" took a glance at herself full in the face and then sideways to judge of the effect of her señorita's costume. It was of rose satin, adorned by two bands of black, fringed velvet; from beneath the very short petticoat appeared her legs, straight as darts in their black silk stockings which threw out the dainty ankles and rounded calves. The Spanish comb with its raised rim cut like an arabesque was

seizing the elignon with its long teeth, and, fastened together with its gold pins, the shawl was falling over her shoulders whose white skin glistened under the lace.

Irma Béchart, her head bare, was standing beside her friend, awaiting only a sign to take from their case two splendid pearl earrings, whilst the dresser, Madame Flochon, was arranging on the toilet-table, with a wearied and bored look, the pots of cold cream which Lucie was about to use for her make-up.

"How do I look?" asked the "diva" of Mademoiselle Béchart, as she was putting on her earrings.

"Oh, charming! You *will* make a sensation!" answered the young girl, in an outburst of sincere admiration.

"Do you think so? Oh, if only what you say is true! But one never knows."

She looked at herself in the mirror and frowned almost imperceptibly.

"I don't know what the future has in store for me," she said in a melancholy tone of voice, "but at present I am by no means up to the mark. Not a single jewel! As for these pearls, they are too glaringly false."

"Haven't you got a diamond in your throat to console you?"

"Nonsense, at the best it is but a pebble."

And turning abruptly to Madame Flochon:

"Is it really a fact," she cried in a chaffing voice, and with a prettily vulgar strut, "eh, is it really a fact, that I've got talent?"

"Why, yes, of course, mademoiselle," stammered the good woman, quite taken aback by such a pointed question.

The call-boy cried out at the bottom of the staircase leading to the ladies' dressing-rooms:

"Ladies, take your places for the first act! The curtain is about to rise!"

"All right, we are coming!" replied Lucie, still in the

same bragging voice which she knew was so piquante coming from her lips, because it contrasted with her modest exterior and made it more taking.

Irma quickly took the furred cloak from its peg and threw it over the actress, who had shiveringly covered her bare chest with her arms to protect it from the draught which was rushing in through the badly made door. When Lucie Guépin had muffled herself up warmly she rushed out of the dressing-room and descended the stairs two steps at a time, bounding like a roe, and pursued by Mademoiselle Béchart who, less active, kept tripping over her dress.

"Yes, yes, you think it's a fine thing to be a singer, you frivolous creature!" said she to Lucie, when she overtook her in the green-room, where all the players who had parts in the piece had already congregated, dressed in their motley costumes.

As if the word had been passed round, an icy silence succeeded the buzz of conversation on the entrance of the "débutante."

"Good-day, ladies and gentlemen," said Lucie, who felt rather awkward at the reception she received.

Her comrades only acknowledged her greeting by an imperceptible inclination of the head, in which one could note plainly their jealousy of this chorus-singer promoted to the rank of a star by the caprice of a director.

She was about to retire, quite out of countenance at the hostile attitude of the company, when Jarly appeared :

"Ah, I thought so, you've got the blues," said he to Lucie, seeing her pretty little face all overcast.

"I!" she answered, clasping the hand which he held out to her, "I was never in better spirits."

"Affected little thing!" murmured Jarly, shrugging his shoulders. "Doesn't she look killing, though!"

The stage-manager had just given the usual three taps

and the orchestra had begun the overture, the sounds of which, deadened by the curtain, were indistinctly heard in the green-room.

"Let us go on the stage," said Jarly to Lucie Guépin; "you appear directly after the alguazil's chorus."

He offered her his arm, and left the room with her, accompanied by Irma, happy at being able at last to escape the ill-humoured looks which were directed at herself and Lucie.

"I should think the governor is smitten with our prima donna!" cried the alcaide directly Jarly had gone out, his nose all smudged with rouge, looking as if it was smeared with blood beneath his silver spangled white hat.

"Nonsense!" replied the duenna, "he always has the first chance at the stars in his company. No sooner is your name on the bills than he falls desperately in love with you; it seems to have that effect on him. Upon my word, I should tremble for my virtue, if ever it happened to me to make a success."

And then they all burst out laughing.

"Never mind, it would only be fair to let Blaizinet know," continued the alcaide, "it is our duty to warn the poor fellow that his honour is being imperilled."

Lucie had placed her eye against a hole in the curtain.

"Is there a good house?" asked Jarly.

"Oh, splendid!" she replied. "But is the press represented? For I must confess that the faces of the critics are not very familiar to me." And at the same time she moved aside to make room for the director.

He looked in his turn. "They are all at their posts," said he after a moment. "I have puffed you so much that not one of them has failed to put in an appearance."

"Everything is ready," said the stage-manager.

Jarly and Lucie left the stage. The curtain rose.

The alguazils, their heads covered with broad, plumed,

grey sombreros, and wearing cuirasses and shoulder belts with swords at their sides, were marching from out a side street on to the grand square of the town, two and two, keeping step, and swinging lighted lanterns with the uniform movement of their arms striped with yellow and black. Singing as they went, they marched round the square, and then wheeled, fronting the public in single file. When they had made an end of explaining in a lively measure their mission, which consisted in patrolling the streets at night to guard the inhabitants, their chief gave the word :

“By the right ! March !” and the little band retired in good order, to the strains of the chorus.

Hardly had the alguazils disappeared than Lucie came on, walking on the tips of her dainty toes, with the timid and shame-faced manner of a young girl who is going to keep her first appointment. The “claque” applauded ; at once several “Hushes” rose from a box on the right where Anna Duc and Berthe Pompon were leaning on the velveted ledge.

“It’s simply grotesque !” said the latter. “What a reception they are giving her !”

“It’s Jarly’s idea !” replied the star in disgrace ; “what a fool that fellow must be !”

After a very short monologue in which the mad-cap related her escapade and confessed in a whisper, with artless roguery, that her little heart was beating for a young student, the lover, muffled up to his chin in a large cloak, rushed towards his mistress.

“My Rosita !” he sighed, seizing her hands, and kissing them with ardour.

“My Pablo !” she murmured with an accent so tender, breathing such infinite passion, that a thrill ran through the men in the theatre, as if it were to them all that the beautiful Andalusian had made her avowal.

“That’s good,” murmured Jarly to the author of the

piece, who was leaning against one of the wings close to him ; “ she has taken hold of the public already. This girl will make a name, mark my words ! ”

The two lovers embraced with mutual affection and the tender duet began. Their eyes looking yearningly at one another, their lips ready to meet in a kiss, they vowed eternal fidelity, calling heaven to witness that in spite of their barbarous parents’ intentions, nothing should ever separate them.

Then Pablo proposed elopement to Rosita ; quickly she consented, and, with their arms round one another’s waists, they persuaded themselves that they were already far away, now roaming in the forest, now in flowery meadows, or asleep side by side in the open air amongst the ferns.

Lucie’s gesture as she offered her lover a spray of eglantine plucked from the side of the path was marked by such exquisite simplicity, her petulance as they pretended to be racing across the open country in the mid-day sun was so amusing, her laugh so joyous, that the whole house, as if caught by this contagious gaiety, burst into a storm of bravos whose sincerity was unmistakable. Decidedly the public was in sympathy with the “*débutante* ;” her young and ardent voice of infinite sweetness, her archly malicious by-play, sparkling with unforced effects, had been at once appreciated, and on all sides one heard exclamations :

“ Good again ! ”

“ What a cheeky youngster ! ”

“ And what grace and elegance ! ”

Above all, she charmed the men, who were stirred to their inmost depths by her great black eyes, shaded by their long lashes, whose penetrating languor fascinated them.

From his corner box the banker Kolbach was only able to see a small portion of the stage, and at every instant Lucie went out of sight, being obliged by the exigencies of the

piece to keep incessantly changing her place. In order to try and follow her movements, he leant half his body out of this accursed box so stupidly placed in a bend, and, his neck stretched out enough to give him a crick in it, he levelled his opera-glasses in a different direction every second. This awkward position, which had already made him feel quite stiff, caused the full light to fall on his bald cranium with its scanty fringe of grizzly hair, and his broad bent back from which sprung his disproportionately short neck. His stomach compressed by the ledge of velvet, the huge man was in danger of suffocation, and when he lifted his head to take breath his apoplectic face disclosed his blood-shot eyes and the veins in his forehead ready to burst. So as not to be surprised in guilty conversation with Pablo, Rosita had just fled at the approach of her guardian, Don Antonio, and Kolbach was able at last to seat himself in a natural position.

"Well, to tell the truth," said he to old Fridoret, one of his senator friends who had accompanied him to see the "Beautiful Andalusian," "it's a good thing the little one has taken her hook, I was just about done!"

"She's a delicious creature," replied Fridoret, his dim eyes lighting up beneath his double eye-glasses. "Unfortunately one can hardly see from here."

Suddenly Kolbach espied two vacant seats in the front row of orchestra stalls. "If I'm not mistaken," said he, "there are two empty seats down there; we'll go and take possession of them."

He had to coax the attendant, who was not inclined to lend a favourable ear: the seats had been booked, and she would render herself liable to a fine if she let the gentlemen have them. Two francs sufficed to dispel her apprehensions and make her break the rules.

Without taking the slightest heed of the grumbling of the

spectators whom they disturbed in the middle of the act, Kolbach and Fridoret gained their stalls, bought at the price of gold, as the banker said, already in his meanness regretting his prodigality towards the attendant. But passion reasons not, and he was now desperately smitten with the new star. However, Rosita had been captured by Don Antonio who took her off home again, having reprimanded her severely, and acquainted her in music that she would have to re-enter the convent until such time as she would consent to marry

“Le seigneur Bartholomé
Si cossu, mais si déplumé !”

She listened, irresolute, to the trembling voice of her old guardian. Which was the more enviable fate, the cloister or Bartholomé? Both filled her with horror. So, finding no answer, she began to weep, in the hope of touching the unfeeling Antonio. The poor child's despair rent the hearts of Kolbach and Fridoret, and it wanted but a trifle more to have made them mingle their tears with hers.

What fools they must be, though, to be affected like this over imaginary troubles! But it was too much for them! The idea that this ravishing child could be in grief—even imaginary grief—quite overcame them. They conquered their ridiculous emotion finally, but they had narrowly escaped piping their eyes. As a kind of consolation, they set themselves to examine minutely the seductive “diva's” charms. What an adorably lovely little face! What a throat! What hips and legs! They rubbed and rubbed again their opera-glasses with their handkerchiefs, the better to admire all these marvels, and in their enthusiasm they forgot themselves so far as to cry out aloud:

“Exquisite! Sweet! Delicious!”

And two young women, one a celebrated singer, the other a painter less known to the world of art by her works than by her strange loves, showed themselves hardly less moved.

They never took their eyes off the little "diva," applauding her vociferously or gazing at her with languishing glances.

The painter, in a moment of transport, threw ardent kisses to Lucie with her delicate, gloved hand ; this amused instead of scandalizing people, for at a distance, seated low in her front stall, the pretty dauber, with her plain, round straw-hat, her close-cut hair, and her double-breasted jacket buttoned back on her breast like a frock coat, would have passed for a young man.

Between the acts, Kolbach and Fridoret went behind the scenes, arm in arm, discussing one against the other in a common ecstasy Lucie's beauty and voice. From time to time they halted on the same step, as if moved by the same idea.

"No, but did you notice her ear?" said Fridoret seriously, planting himself in front of Kolbach.

"Did I notice it!" replied the banker. "The delicacy of it! It's simply a perfect work of art!"

In the lobby they were accosted by some members of the Mirlitons and Jockey clubs.

"Excuse me, my dear Kolbach," said the Princee D'Estrelles rather ironically to him, "man of taste as you are, you seemed to me to appreciate Lucie Guépin most particularly, as a woman and as an actress. Am I wrong?"

"Yes, and no, my dear prince," replied the banker; "I must confess that she has made a very favourable impression on me. She has charming ways!"

"I will wager," continued the prince, "that you are going to try and steal her heart."

"Oh, I did not say that."

"But I guessed it."

"You can take your oath," observed Fridoret, "that friend Kolbach will not compete for the 'diva's' favours until the day that he knows for certain that one of us—De Méras for

instance—is her official lover. In our dear banker's opinion a woman owes her principal attraction to the fact that she has been Monsieur de Mèras's mistress."

"Slanderer!" exclaimed Kolbach slightly embarrassed.

"Ah, there!" said the prince, "you need not trouble to deny it. You are an amateur, and as such, attach no value to any pictures which do not come from a celebrated gallery."

Just at that moment De Mèras came up.

"Well, gentlemen," asked he, "what do you think of my little protégée?"

"We are enchanted with her," replied Kolbach.

"Yes, you are right," pursued De Mèras, "she has made a good—a very good impression. There is something in her evidently. And you will see in the second act that her success will be confirmed."

He took his leave and passed on to other groups, continuing his task of gathering the different opinions.

He was making a thorough research into the effect produced by Lucie and the hopes that one would be justified in founding on her future. Up to the present he had every reason to expect a satisfactory result, and he had already been up on the stage to announce that, "everything was going on well, and that the house seemed very pleased."

Béchart, too, was actively canvassing in Lucie's favour, "out of consideration," as he said, "for the friendship which existed between the 'débutante' and Irma."

And he would have been more zealous still, if he had not been very much put out by Lobel's absence.

Where could the young man be? How was it no one had seen him? Madame Béchart especially was in a fever. She trembled to think that some evil had befallen "her friend." Armand had made such a formal appointment with her! If he had been prevented from coming why had he not informed

her? The more she thought over it, the more she feared some accident. Béchart did his best to reassure her.

"It is not reasonable to torment yourself like this," he kept repeating, "have patience ; he will come."

"I wish to heaven he may," she said anxiously, really very uneasy.

And in her infatuation she dragged her husband about the passages and staircases in search of the no-where-to-be-found Armand.

Twenty times already had they traversed the lobby and explored every nook in the refreshment-room, but in vain.

At last Juliette discovered Armand near the vestibule, in earnest conversation with Fridoret.

"There he is !" she said, and abruptly letting go Béchart's arm she ran towards the young man.

"How late you are," she said, without taking any notice of the senator who bowed respectfully to her ; "I was uneasy ! It is very wrong of you to torture me like this !"

He stammered some excuse, very vexed at being accosted, almost attacked, in this manner by his mistress in the presence of Fridoret.

"Au revoir, dear boy," said the latter, discreetly taking his leave, after bowing afresh to Juliette.

"Ah ! Master Armand," cried Béchart, as soon as Fridoret had gone, "it's a good job for you that you've come ! My sister-in-law was ready to die ! So, to console her, you must not leave her again all the evening. Oh, that's the least you can do for her !"

Then, in the same breath : "Who was that gentleman," he asked, "whom you were talking to just now ?"

"Monsieur Fridoret, a senator," replied Lobel, carelessly.

"Ah, yes ; on the Right ! So much the worse, he has not got any influence," said Béchart between his teeth.

Anna Duc and Berthe Pompon, who were displaying their

gaudy toilets on one of the sofas in the lobby, had just noticed De M^éras's manœuvres as he went about from group to group spreading Lucie's praises.

"I should hope he's degrading himself enough on behalf of the Guépin!" said Anna, exasperated. "Fancy demeaning himself to that extent!"

"It's bribery—electoral corruption!" replied Berthe, laughing.

"Oh, he can move heaven and earth; the little fool will sing no better for all that. Is it possible that he's smitten with this minx? And to think that he has sacked you to make way for such rubbish! I say, if I were you, I should smack the little monkey's face! It's only right you should take it out of her, there's always consolation in that! It's to be hoped he isn't going to make a goddess of her! Really he's treated you too shamefully!"

"Oh, nonsense! he's a good enough fellow at heart, and I bear no malice towards him. When he's had his fill of her, he'll come back to me perhaps."

"Why, you can't have any pluck!" replied Anna, disgusted; "if ever you were mean enough to make it up with him again—"

She did not stop to finish.

In the height of her excitement the idea suddenly occurred to her that that impertinent Jarly had very likely had the cheek to let Lucie take up her quarters in her dressing-room.

That would have been the finishing touch! But no, he would never have dared to do so! Ah, she would go and find out for herself!

Abruptly, and without a word of explanation, she left Berthe Pompon, rushed out of the theatre, and pushed her way in by the stage door.

"Where are you going, madame?" asked the door-keeper, running after her.

"It is I," she answered, making a violent effort to conceal her agitation.

"Impossible! Madame Anna Duc! I beg your pardon, I did not recognise you," said the man, looking sheepish. "But who would have expected to-day—"

She went on without replying. When she arrived at her old dressing-room she opened the door violently and entered.

Lucie, ready dressed for the second act, was preparing to go down.

"You know this place is mine, I suppose," shouted Anna Duc, with flushed cheeks. And elbowing her roughly on one side she threw herself on the toilet-table, seized one after the other all the objects with which it was loaded, and threw them pell-mell all over the room.

"Oh, the jade!" she shrieked, beside herself with fury; "the jade! This thing uses my combs, scents herself with my perfumes, takes my rouge and my black! Just wait a minute!" And she stamped with rage on the brushes and bottles scattered on the floor.

When there was nothing more to throw about or break, she picked up a pair of scissors and began to cut huge holes in the hangings.

"This stuff is mine; I've a right to do as I like with it," she screamed.

The slashed cretonne was hanging everywhere in ribbons, and disclosing the wall covered with a smoky coating of plaster. This stupid violence had been too much for her nerves, for she withdrew without a word, almost quieted again and with a smile on her face.

Lucie, quite dumfounded, had watched her operations, incapable of resisting or protesting; Irma and Madame Flochon in their fright had not attempted to interpose.

After Anna had gone out the three women looked at one another an instant in dejection and consternation.

"Ah, my poor darling!" said Irma, at last breaking the silence.

Lucie burst into tears, then, recovering herself, and her eyes becoming suddenly dry, she bounded out of the dressing-room.

At the bottom of the staircase she ran up against Jarly.

"Listen what has happened to me," she said, choked with sobs.

And she related in broken and disconnected sentences Anna's escapade.

"What a fuss you are making about nothing!" replied Jarly. "You simple child, can't you understand that she is furious at your success? She is fit to die of jealousy! Ah, if you had only been a bit hissed, she would have devoured you with kisses and called you her dear darling!"

She went through all the second act, a trifle nervously, but none the worse for that. In the third she sang the drinking-song with such fire and "go" that there was a perfect storm of applause.

She was recalled three times.

As she made her bow to the public, with her little modest air, as if she had been astonished at her ovation, five or six superb bouquets fell at her feet. After the curtain had fallen, and she saw Blaizinot in the middle of the company, she rushed up to him and kissed him madly.

"I am proud of her!" cried the strolling-player, pacing the stage in triumph; "I am proud of her, for she is my pupil!"

CHAPTER IV

"How's business?" asked Jarly of the money-taker at the box-office, as he returned from breakfasting with a friend at the Café Riche.

"I've taken eighteen hundred francs already for this evening," replied the woman, adding, "oh, I think it'll go."

Jarly did not answer, moving away from the wicket to make room for a lady and gentleman.

"You know, Monsieur Jarly, that people are beginning to book in advance; that's a good sign," cried the box office-keeper, when the couple had taken their tickets and gone.

"No matter, eighteen hundred francs, and it's two o'clock—bad business. I would have laid odds that we had taken two thousand five hundred."

"We've only got to sell a few boxes and one or two stalls, and we shall have reached your figure."

Two or three journalists entered and shook hands with Jarly, who was leaning against a column in the vestibule.

"Well," said one of them, "you are going to fill your money-bags, my boy! Ah, you can thank your stars, for the piece was beginning to get stale."

"Stale!" protested Jarly.

"Not the less true that without this little Lucie—" said another. "Anyway, how's the booking going on?"

"The booking! Splendidly, my dear fellow!" And turning towards the money-taker: "How much have you

taken?" he asked, winking. "You said four thousand two hundred for this evening, and two thousand eight hundred for to-morrow."

"Quite correct, sir," replied the clerk.

"Would you like me to put a line in for you?" asked one of the journalists. "Something like this—'The director of the Folies-Parisiennes, in consequence of the ever-increasing rush for seats, has been obliged to open a second box-office.'"

"That's good—the second box-office!"

But the journalist continued writing in his note-book. "Forty-five thousand francs' worth of places have already been booked in advance. Monsieur Jarly has named his new star, Mademoiselle Lucie Guépin, 'The good fairy.'"

"Yes, put that in; in two or three days I will send you all a fresh par."

"At your service," replied the three journalists, going out.

That evening they only took three thousand five hundred francs, the next, three thousand six hundred, and on the day after, three thousand four hundred, and that with difficulty.

"It will end by taking," repeated the box-office-keeper, "it's impossible for it to be otherwise," and she assured Jarly that all the spectators, the old ones especially, were charmed with little Guépin.

"Never mind, we ought to be taking over five thousand, considering her first night's success."

He racked his brain to discover the cause of the strange ill-odour his theatre was in, and he would have almost been glad to discover a fault in Lucie which would account for the smallness of the receipts.

Hardly had De Méras, who had not appeared at the theatre for two days, met Jarly, than the latter, very much out of temper, began to relate his troubles. The fact was

the little one did not act up to her promises ; that she was very much appreciated was undeniable, but, after all, the money was not coming in. De Méras listened patiently to all Jarly's grievances about Lucie ; finally, in a voice which he tried to render indifferent :

" Hang it all ! it's your fault too," he said.

" Your fault ! Whose ? Mine ? "

" Yours—hers. Hers especially."

" Explain."

" Oh, certainly. How can you expect these club-men to be interested in your 'diva' as long as they know that she is so madly attached to her player ? "

" Of course, I know it too well, and I told Lucie often enough when we were rehearsing. This kind of thing gets abroad, and has a very bad effect."

" Naturally. The public has always had a weakness for actresses whom it believes to be virtuous."

" And my star is so no longer ! But I have remedied the evil to the best of my power, by drawing up some artful paragraphs for the papers, imputing chastity to the girl."

In the remarks which were to appear the next day in the "Theatre Courier" or the "Evenings at the Theatres," were mentioned the naïve observations of the innocent "diva," her childlike character, the pleasure which she took in playing with her doll : every evening between the acts she amused herself by undressing and dressing that of the door-keeper's daughter. She had even been surprised skipping behind one of the wings as fast as she could, tucking her petticoats between her legs so as to be able to jump higher. Her mother, who existed only in the imagination of Jarly, had only allowed her, up to her début in the "Beautiful Andalusian," thirty-five francs a month. The little one had hopes, now that she was earning twelve thousand francs yearly, that her pocket-money would be at least doubled, and she

had already discounted this increase by ordering an enormous box of bon-bons ! Then followed the long list of presents which had been sent to Lucie Guépin by her numerous admirers. The bouquets and baskets of flowers, the gold bracelets, on which was lettered in fine torquoises, "A connoisseur," the charms on which sparkled in diamonds the word "Bravo !" the necklets of white or black pearls, all repeating as they laid in their cases the name of "Lucie Guépin," the solitaires which were given her, "to keep her company," as the legend ran, the rings, the medallions, the brooches ! The gentlemen, who were decidedly treating the prima-donna like a spoiled child, had sent her enough presents to fill a jeweller's window.

De Méras expressed his strong approval of the publication of these puffs crying up Lucie's artlessness.

"A virtuous actress," said he, "is a phenomenon, and phenomena always draw."

As he was going up to his room with Hector, Jarly met the fat Anna Duc.

"Hullo, Anna ! How's the lost voice ?" he asked.

"Better, I thank you," said Anna.

"Why do you go out if you are not quite well ?" observed Jarly

"Why, to announce that I'm going to take my part again to-night, my boy !"

"Going to take your part again ?"

"Certainly ; you've already lost money through me."

"It's very good of you to be anxious, for I am not losing any ; on the contrary, I am making a lot."

"I knew that beast of a piece would pick up about the twenty-fifth night !" said Anna, in a cutting voice ; and returning to the object of her visit : "You are going to put a notice on the bills to announce that I shall re-appear this evening, I suppose ?"

Jarly could not control a burst of laughter.

"A notice," he repeated, holding his sides, "a notice over Lucie Guépin's name!"

"And not before it's wanted! She must have been having a pleasant dream, this figure-dancer, for the last three days," retorted Anna, scornfully.

"Ah, good!" replied Jarly, calmly, becoming serious again. "You have not read the critiques, then?"

"On this Lucie? Well—no, I should think not, indeed!"

"You were wrong, because you could have convinced yourself that she has not been over-badly treated by the press."

"Oh, a few articles that have been paid for. I know the dodge, because I have made use of it myself in times gone by."

"Admitting that these panegyrics were bought, a fact we won't discuss, it is none the less true that the public confirms them every evening by its applause, and the pieces it brings in. Besides, I will give you a stall, you can judge for yourself of the effect Lucie produces. I should like your opinion."

"You needn't make fun me! But you've always been a vulgar person, so I mean to cancel my agreement," cried Anna, who for several minutes had had difficulty in containing herself.

Jarly smiled with satisfaction.

"She's coming to it," he murmured. Then aloud to Anna: "You are not serious, you don't think of leaving me, do you?"

"Yes, indeed. I would rather die of hunger than remain any longer in your shop."

Besides, this wretched "Folies-Parisiennes" theatre had not long to live, if it was conducted after this fashion! To drag a singer out of the chorus to double a principal part,

that alone was coming it rather strong. But to refuse to allow the rightful owner to take her part again when she claimed it ! Ah, that was a fool's game ! Nothing less than swift ruin !

"Thanks for your prediction," said Jarly, modestly.

"Don't laugh, you'll be in a hole sooner than you think, and it's my hope that before a month's over the rats will come and gnaw the cushions during the performance. No, but I long to see your Guépin creating a part she has not seen played. That'll be a sight ! Gently with the hisses ! I would give something to see it ; it would be a sight for sore eyes ! Anyway, give me back the agreement, I'm going to get my togs."

"Give you back the agreement ! No fear ! You signed for three years, my little puss, don't forget that !"

"And if I refuse to double Guépin's part—for it's come to that—I am not aware that you can force me to accept such a job."

"No, certainly not, if you consent to pay your thirty thousand francs' forfeit."

"Thirty thousand francs !"

"Every sou of it. I have your signature for it."

Anna reflected an instant ; then, in a decided voice :

"Very good ! You shall be paid your thirty thousand francs. I'm not the first whom you have served this trick, and you must have made a nice pile with all the forfeits that you've collared since the beginning of the year ! It's a very original method of becoming a millionaire, treating the public to nothing but third-rate actresses ! Ah, that's your line, taking advantage of women !"

"Do you think she will pay up the thirty thousand francs ?" asked De Méras, as soon as the singer had gone.

"Do I think so ! To-morrow morning the Prince D'Estrelles, her lover, will bring me them."

It was Blanche Ivoire's turn to enter the manager's room in a furious rage after Anna had gone. It was a day for scenes.

She held in her hand a roll of paper, her part in the next piece, which she threw with a movement of disgust on Jarly's desk.

"You can turn that over to some one else, for I'll have nothing to do with it!" she cried.

"But I've told you the costume that you are to wear," said Jarly, quickly, "it's most becoming. Just picture to yourself, De Méras, desperately close-fitting tights, and, for clothing, absolutely nothing beyond a jewelled girdle with a wisp of silver tissue, starred with gold, about three inches broad, fastened at the height of the chin, and floating down to the ankles, just to disarm censure, and make people think that we wanted to hide something."

"It will be very fetching, no doubt, especially with the arms and legs that every one knows Blanche possesses."

"I believe you! Besides, it is the authorized costume of the maids of the harem."

"Understand, Master Méras, it's not the costume that I find fault with, on the contrary. But just have a look at this part!" she said, taking up in her little fidgetty fingers the roll she had thrown on the table; "it consists of eleven words."

"You forget to mention that you are on the stage the whole time, or very nearly."

"In the ruck, the second row, like a puppet! At any rate, I have made up my mind; if the author does not give me at least five or six more replies, I won't play the maid of the harem! In the first place, Emma, who plays the other slave, has three more replies than I have."

"You have counted them?"

"Certainly! In the first act she has: 'Let us fly;' in

the second, 'Yes, my lord;' and in the third, 'Thanks, princess!'"

"Why not give the young lady 'Let us fly?'" hazarded De Méras.

"If that's all she wants to make her happy, she can go so far as to say, 'Thanks, princess,'" sneered Jarly.

"Well, I'm going to propose an arrangement which is simplicity itself," declared Blanche. "As it is of the greatest importance to me to appear to have a part—"

"To the stalls?"

"The stalls, exactly! For you don't imagine, surely, that I can live on a salary of one hundred and fifty francs?"

"I should like to be able to think so, especially when I see you rigged out as you are."

"This pelisse alone cost me eighteen hundred francs, my boy. Well, come, we'll tear up the old agreement and sign another, by which you give me three hundred francs a month when I do not act, and nothing at all when I have more than fifty lines to say!"

"That's rather good!" observed De Méras. "In other words, Jarly is to pay for your fire, whilst you sit and warm yourself at home?"

Jarly was holding his sides.

"Is it agreed?" asked Blanche.

"Most certainly, if only for the novelty of the thing."

"I will sign to-morrow; but have a few little words put in for me, won't you?" said she, with a suppliant little pout as she went out.

"She is quite willing to have her part lengthened, but her petticoats, never!"

"It's lucky she did not want a song for her three hundred francs!"

At that moment Lucie's clear, brilliant voice was heard ringing in the lobby.

"Here is your star," said De Méras, getting up to open the door for the "diva."

"Ah! Monsieur de Méras!" said Lucie, smiling.

"You are in voice, so it seems?"

"I! I would take Marguerite's part in Faust to day, if I knew the music."

"And when are we going to be friends?" continued Hector, without letting go the young woman's hands, and looking into the depth of her eyes with a fixedness which made her feel uncomfortable.

"Are we not so already?" replied she, calling his attention with a look to the clasped hands.

"Why don't you kiss her? She asks nothing better!" interposed Jarly.

De Méras kissed Lucie on each cheek.

"That's it, brother and sister!" said she. "Are you satisfied now? Is that friendship, as you understand it?"

"Not quite," replied De Méras.

"We will settle that afterwards. But you seem to have business with my director. I will call again."

"De Méras is a friend, you can unburthen yourself before him."

"No, no," interrupted Hector. "It is time to go to the Bois; au revoir!"

"Don't make it too long, and, above all, put in a good word for this child at the club—everywhere! Ah! if we could only beat the record!"

Hardly had De Méras gone, than Jarly began to reproach Lucie.

"You do make a fool of yourself!" he cried.

"How, might I ask?"

"Ah! yes, it's very 'cute of you to come the prude over De Méras!"

"Well, what then?"

"Confound it! you're too stupid! Your future depends on this fellow, and you do everything in your power to shun him. You must see that he's smitten with you!"

"He's too late in the field; I love another."

"That booby of a Blaizinot?"

"Exactly so."

"Well, to begin with, I forbid your precious Blaizinot to enter the green-room! He can kick his heels at your door, if that's any pleasure to him!"

"As you like."

"Your walking gentleman will cost you pretty dear!"

"That's my business!"

"Well you understand, don't you? I won't have him in my theatre again, and I shall go and instruct Pipart at once."

"We'll see about that!" said she, tossing her head, and she left the room, slamming the door violently after her.

A few minutes afterwards Jarly went down to Pipart, the door-keeper, and ordered him not to admit Blaizinot on any pretence whatsoever. In the evening, when the comedian presented himself, not having been forewarned by Lucie, who had not for an instant believed the director's threat, Pipart refused him entry. Blaizinot lost his temper at first, to the point of abusing the door-keeper, but the latter having threatened to send for the police, the comedian thought it prudent not to insist. He took his departure, looking very foolish, and unable to understand the reception he had met with. As he walked along, he reproached himself for not having asked Pipart—an old comrade—from whom this inexplicable order came.

It could not be Jarly, who had always been very civil to him. In fact, they had come out together at a suburban

music hall, where their common poverty had given rise to a sincere friendship. Jarly up to this day had never appeared to have forgotten their former cordial relations, in spite of his prosperity, which was rather humiliating for poor Blaizinot. Now, besides Jarly, who had the right to exclude him? For a moment Lucie's name sprang to his lips.

"She," he thought, "she lay such an affront on me!" Why, they had separated that morning after breakfast on the best of terms, he, more and more attached to a woman who was all the rage, she, seeming always to have the same affection for him.

He entered the furnished rooms which he inhabited with his mother in the Faubourg Saint-Denis. She, astonished at his early return, and remarking his sad face, asked him what ailed him. He did not answer, as if choked by emotion.

"Oscar!" she cried, "that girl has forsaken you, has she not? Ah! of course she has no further need of you now!" And throwing her arms round the comedian:

"Ah, my poor child! what will become of us without her, since all these miserable directors will have nothing to do with you? Your mother's watch will have to go to the pawn-shop. And after that, the Lord have mercy on us!"

This cry of despair uttered by the old woman was a ray of light to Blaizinot. Of course it was Lucie who had given Pipart the order! Intoxicated by success, she was turning her back on the friends of her misfortune!

And yet he had been good enough to her. His mother and he had taken her in, and it was to their efforts that she owed her place in the chorus at the "Folies-Parisiennes," and consequently her fortune. Then the remembrance of De Méras's attitude towards Lucie, the day of the full rehearsal, and the evening of her "début," the hand-shakes they had exchanged, came back to his mind, and to his excited imagination furnished full proof of her treason. Evidently

this man was the "diva's" lover, and had demanded the immediate dismissal of the poor comedian !

The wretched girl had obeyed him ! Such was the reward for all his services in the past !

"To-morrow," said his mother, who had traced all these mentally-pronounced maledictions on her son's face, "to-morrow we will go together to see her and tell her our opinion of her."

"It's needless, mother," declared the actor, striking an attitude. "She would think, perhaps, that we had come to demand the price of our services !"

"You are right, Oscar. You, at least, have some pride, and I recognize my son in you," exclaimed Madame Blaizinot. And when she asked him what were his intentions,

"I shall work," he replied, "since I am forced to it, but it shall not be for my ungrateful country !"

Then he told his mother that an agent had offered him, that very morning, a splendid engagement in America, on condition that he held himself in readiness to start the next day.

"You are going to leave your native land, then ?"

"Needs must !" he replied, with a gesture like that of Cæsar giving his troops the word to cross the Rubicon.

Next day, sure enough, at half-past nine in the morning, he entered the train with all the rest of the company, and embarked the same evening at Havre for Montevideo. He had hoped up till the last moment to receive a message of explanation from his mistress ; but it came not. To tell the truth, Lucie had stayed at home, being persuaded that Blaizinot and his mother would come to breakfast as usual. Just as, tired of waiting, she was sitting down to table, the "concierge" brought a letter up. She recognized at once her lover's handwriting, and, hastily tearing open the envelope, read :

“MY DEAR FRIEND,

I never have been and never will be a trouble to any one, and to you less than any other. That is to say that I shall never again attempt to enter your theatre after the reception I met with there yesterday.

“You want your liberty, and are famous enough now to be independent of the services of that idiot Blaizinot ; I leave you, then, to your new and rich lovers, and recommend you to forget as quickly as possible your benefactors ! When you receive this letter I shall have begun my journey to America. If I die there, and you have any heart left, recollect that I leave a mother in Paris to whom you owe almost as much as I myself. I entrust her to your care !”

And then, underneath, written in a very trembling hand—on purpose, no doubt,

“May you be happy !

Your

OSCAR.”

“Well ! that’s rather too much !” cried Lucie. And she invited the “concierge” to breakfast, to have some one to whom she could tell the story. There ! really ! it was too much !

CHAPTER V

LUCIE could not believe that Blaizinot had started for America. It must be a joke that the facetious comedian was playing her. Or else, an actor always, in life as on the boards, he had imagined this theatrical excuse in order to obtain her pardon for his absence from breakfast. He was in a pet with her. But why? What had he to reproach her with? She questioned herself, seeking to recall in what way she could have set him against her. The examination of her conscience over, she found herself not guilty. At least, as far as she herself knew. Woman is never perfect, is she? But no, she had always shown herself affectionate, attentive, devoted and submissive, excessively so, even; for, in order not to wound her lover's strange susceptibility, she was obliged to be as unnaturally forced in her words as in her acts. If, when he was hoarse, she did not protest her love for him in the strongest terms, or affect the deepest concern, this extraordinary fellow called heaven to witness that she hated him and rejoiced at his sufferings. The actor could look at feelings and objects only after the most exaggerated fashion, even in the streets he treated everything as if he were on the boards. He was theatre-sick, though he had not appeared for so long, and it was no doubt by way of making amends for and softening the rigour of his enforced idleness that he was playing a comedy thus at home. All at once Lucie bethought herself that Jarly had

told her in the plainest terms the day before that he should refuse Blaizinot admittance to the green-room.

Could the director have carried out his threat? It was probable, and especially so, as by taking such a course he hoped to be agreeable to De Méras. If in reality he had given the door-keeper orders to that effect, there could be no doubt that the actor, having been denied access, had laid his ostracism at his mistress's door. And then, in a burst of ill-temper, theatrical still, out of obstinacy, he had rushed off to an agent and signed an agreement to go abroad.

Nonsense! What a ridiculous idea! Was Blaizinot the sort of man to brave the perils of the sea to go and earn with difficulty abroad a scanty salary, and risk catching the yellow fever or some other deadly disease? The dear fellow was fond of life, especially the quiet and lazy life he led in Paris, thanks to his "little pupil."

He hated to be upset, and above all, to work, which, as he said, "consumed him by slow torture," and suddenly renouncing his rooted habit of sloth, his principle of absolute quietude, he had embarked for the New World with the distressing prospect of having to take trouble to live!

Once more, the thing was impossible! She knew her Blaizinot too well to suspect him of such energy. Having thought well over it, she was persuaded that he had only wished to frighten her, and she resolved to go and see him directly after breakfast, to convince him of his little Lucie's innocence, and make her peace with him. Hardly had she left the table than she dressed herself in haste to go and give the naughty fellow a good scolding for the anxiety he had caused her by his ideas of going away. Besides, she was not hungry, she was agitated and nervous, and her food stuck in her throat.

When the servant had put the partridge on the table Lucie had cast a mournful glance at Blaizinot's vacant place. He

was so fond of partridge, poor fellow, and how he would have relished, epicure as he was, the truffles with which the succulent bird was stuffed ! But no ! My lord was in the sulks, and preferred eating ham and cheese in his furnished lodgings to coming to her place and regaling himself on his favourite dishes. And yet the game, cooked to a turn, threw out a most inviting odour ; and that silly Blaizinot who could not smell it ! She tried to joke with the “concierge,” who, being very much affected by her lodger’s grief, was in no laughing humour. To forget her trouble the good woman had crammed herself with truffles at first, but the experiment appeared not to have succeeded, for with one hand she was brushing away a tear, whilst in the other she was brandishing a partridge’s leg, preparatory to gnawing it to the bone.

For a moment, a presentiment that Blaizinot had spoken the truth had oppressed Lucie. And supposing he had really gone ? If, out of spite, believing that she had sacrificed him for another richer than he, he had left Paris for good ? With such an eccentric character, was there not ground to fear the worst ? At this thought, tears started to her eyes. She loved her little Oscar so much ! He was such a good sort of fellow, so frank ; with him, at least, she was at her ease, and could say any silly thing that came into her head, whilst with swells she was obliged to keep a watch over and weigh carefully all her expressions. And how this constraint bored her ! Hang it ! she had not received a very careful education, and she was quite embarrassed before these correct gentlemen. She was always afraid of being made fun of by them. Her Oscar, now, was of her station, and she could have full play with him. No danger of his taking her to task over her bad manners ; he was no judge of them ! And where there’s no comfort, there’s no pleasure ! One should see them, her and Oscar ! Ah ! that was love, if you like ! And then, she could not hide it from herself, she preferred to

all the delicate perfumes of the dandies who strutted about her, the strong odour of the green-room with which Oscar was impregnated from head to foot. No one but actors smelt nice like that. And weren't they pretty, too, with their clean-shaven mugs! In truth, there was some indefinable charm about them. Now, with other men it was quite a different thing!

Heavens! if only Oscar has not decamped! Never, never to see him again, poor old man! Ah! it would make her ill! Yet in spite of this the "concierge" was tipping bumpers of Bordeaux, and the wine she drank was as sensitive as her heart, for the more she drank, the moister became her look. Feverishly Lucie threw on a dress, put on the first hat that came under her hand, and took a cab to the Faubourg Saint-Denis, to Blaizinot's house. The comedian, sure enough, had taken the train for Havre the evening before. This bad news increased Lucie's distress, and she drove to the theatre, resolved to have an explanation with Jarly on the spot, and know categorically whether he had forbidden Oscar admission to the green-room. On being told by an official that Jarly was disengaged, she entered his room without knocking.

"I'm not disturbing you?" she asked Jarly in a dry voice, seating herself in the armchair to which he motioned her.

"What a question!" he replied, "I'm always enchanted to see you."

"Was it you who gave the order to the door-keeper?" said she abruptly.

"What order?"

"Not to admit Monsieur Blaizinot when he presented himself at the stage door."

"Most certainly!"

"It is an abuse of authority."

"Gently, my pretty one, it seems to me you are not quite re-

spectful to your master, and a director is master in his own house."

"Well, at the present moment Blaizinot is on the way to America. That is the result of his iniquitous dismissal!"

"To America! He! At any rate we are well rid of him!" said Jarly, with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Ah! it is too bad!" cried she, weeping with rage.

The door opened and De Méras appeared. "Oh, I beg pardon," said he, greeting Lucie with a nod, without coming in, "you are busy, I'll be off."

"Did you want to speak to me?" asked Jarly.

"No, nothing of importance. I will call again." And noticing Lucie, who was wiping her eyes with her cambric handkerchief. "What! Tears! Ah, Mr. Director, if you have been the cause of this sweet child's grief, cast yourself at once in the dust—of the carpet—to implore forgiveness."

"I will give you a thousand guesses at the reason of her trouble," returned Jarly. And without awaiting a reply, he added: "Her dear Blaizinot has taken his hook, my boy!"

"The pretty child has only too much cause for sorrow," said De Méras in an almost imperceptibly sarcastic voice. "And so, mademoiselle, you must try and employ your mind, and if you take my advice you will do me the honour to accompany me to the Bois in my brougham."

Lucie refused, with a short "Thanks."

"Come, you can't have made up your mind already," returned the young man. "Do not falsify the proverb, 'woman is ever variable,' and let us feel assured that in a quarter of an hour's time there will be, perhaps, a change of opinion in my favour. So I will wait for you below, in front of the theatre, and will say good-bye till I see you again directly."

The director, surprised at this abrupt departure, saw De Méras shut the door without a word of persuasion to remain,

and when the sound of his steps had died away and the passage had become silent again, he rested his forehead on his hands and appeared to reflect. Then, all at once, he raised his head, looked for an instant at Lucie who was impassively staring at the carpet, and, irritated at the real or affected indifference of the actress, he uttered an oath and brought his fist down on the desk with a crash which nearly overturned the ink-stand and scattered the pens on the shelf. Lucie started.

“Ah, you frightened me!” she said.

He replied only by a shrug of the shoulders, and sprang up, walked up and down the room a few times, then came and planted himself in front of the young woman. Ah! he would not spare her in what he had to say. And in his temper he went so far as to speak in insulting terms, the impropriety of which escaped his notice, carried away as he was by the feverish rapidity of his utterances. But there, really! it was impossible for any one to be such a fool as this girl. To repulse, with this absurd obstinacy, all the advances of such a useful man as De Méras. What mad feeling could she be obeying, in affecting such an incomprehensible disdain for him? Did she not like him? The deuce, she was hard to please if that were the case. All the women, and the most fashionable ones, if you please, doted on him; his successes had been innumerable. And even if she had not found him to her taste, ought she not to have reasoned with herself and conquered her aversion? Was not such a protector worth overcoming the most invincible repugnances? Was not this stupid little Lucie aware that on him, and him alone, depended her whole future as an actress, and even that of the *Folies-Parisiennes*? he added mentally. If only Hector would consent to use the least particle of his influence he would soon have made Lucie all the rage, as he had done for so many others less happily gifted than she.

De Méras made or unmade reputations at will ; every one knew that ! It was enough, if the stupid public knew that the celebrated libertine had thrown his handkerchief to such and such an actress, for the favourite of this pacha of the green-room to become that of all Paris. It was absurd, but so it was ; there were the receipts to attest the fact, and figures, always eloquent, were doubly so for him, a director. Jarly admitted it freely ; he was staking his all on Lucie. If she did not draw money, it was a case of speedy failure ; to spare her director this disgrace, it sufficed for her to become Hector's mistress, or, at all events, to be so in appearance.

He could guarantee the system ; it was infallible. And he repeated persuasively, much moved, that she had only to put it to the proof, and she would quickly see that he was speaking the truth. Had she not, too, everything to gain by showing herself no longer obstinate, for her salary would rise in proportion to her success ? And that same success only depended on a little complacence on her part.

De Méras, once her lover, and immediately, as if by enchantment, there would be full houses every night, a crowd of anecdotes and paragraphs about her smallest acts, parties in her honour, not to mention fifty or sixty thousand francs at the end of the year, instead of the wretched twelve thousand, which she was paid now.

And then, perhaps, she hoped to excite De Méras's passion by slighting him. Ah, well, she was deceiving herself nicely. De Méras was not the kind of man to be affected by disdain ; coldness drove him away, instead of attracting him like it did so many others. But, to come to the point, why did she resist him ? From virtue ? That was rather too absurd ! And, besides, when one has lived with a strolling player as his wife, one is hardly in a position to qualify for a "resière." But if she pushed her folly to the

point of wishing to remain faithful to Blaizinot, there was nothing for her but the lunatic asylum. Be true to my lord Oscar ! Why did not she fall in love with the prompter while she was about it ? Besides, her player was making a fool of her. Had he not been unfaithful to her with the first figurante whom he found to his taste ?

The "impresario" had thrown out his accusation at hazard, to compel the "diva's" disgust at this Blaizinot, who had not hesitated to intrigue with low women. But Lucie, dumb-founded by her director's flow of words, her eyes still fixed on the ground, as if crushed, answered nothing ; the treason imputed to her lover did not seem to rouse her from her state of indifference.

"Come, I have convinced her," thought Jarly, "she protests no longer. Now's the time to take her to De Méras."

He put on his hat, and holding out his hand to Lucie to assist her to rise :

"It's late ; I'm off. Are you coming ?" said he, leading her out of the room.

Hector was walking up and down in front of the theatre, smoking a cigar.

"I entrust my star to you," said Jarly, and, opening the door of the brougham, he took Lucie by the waist and pushed her in, motioning at the same time to De Méras to take his seat at her side.

"To the Bois !" he called out to the coachman, when he saw the young man had taken his place on the silk cushions, next to the actress.

"And, now, they can settle it between them," he added, mentally, as the carriage drove off down the Boulevard at full trot.

Lucie had allowed herself to be hoisted into the brougham without resistance. After the state of over-excitement into

which Blaizinet's prank had thrown her, her nerves had become so unstrung as to take away from her momentarily all energy and will, and Jarly had profited by her weakness to deliver her over to De Méras. It was only at the end of the Rue Royale, near the Place de la Concorde, that the young woman, who, till then, had remained motionless, inert, her eyes staring and full of thought, seemed to issue from her stupor, and turned towards Hector. She looked at him a moment, her lips drawn tightly, with a hardly disguised expression of anger and scorn.

"I congratulate you," said she, all at once, in a haughty tone. "Up to now the kidnapping has succeeded admirably. I don't care, I should never have thought you capable of using violence towards a woman!"

And, as Hector seemed rather embarrassed :

"That's a nice line Monsieur Jarly has embarked on. After that, I suppose, you will tell me you had not an understanding with him?" she continued, ironically.

"Truly not, I give you my word of honour on it," he replied with the readiness of an innocent man who has been unjustly accused. "And if it is to our friend the director that I owe my good fortune—"

"Good fortune, forsooth! I should recommend you not to count too much on it," she said, interrupting him.

"How naughty you are to-day!" he replied, trying to seize her hand, which she drew away sharply.

He was silent, comprehending that she was still too irritated to listen to his excuses, and, to keep himself in countenance, he began to look through the window at the Avenue of the Champs Elysées, all crowded with carriages and cabs hastening in rows towards the Bois.

After a few minutes of silence he returned gently to the charge, and although, her back turned to him, and her face pressed against the padded side of the brougham, she affected

not to listen, he set forth at full length the plea which he had been elaborating.

He was perfectly willing to admit that appearances were against him, and any one else, even had they had no suspicions beforehand, would have been equally of opinion that he had had a hand in the practical joke of which she had been the victim. But once again, he affirmed solemnly that he was in no manner Jarly's accomplice, and he condemned his unpardonable conduct. The uncooth fellow had thought to have done something clever, and instead, he had acted like a blockhead. De Méras, for his part, went to work in a very different way with women, and if he had managed to make himself agreeable to some few, it was by respect and attention. Would he have kept up the amicable relations with his past mistresses—and every one knew that such was the case—if he had not always conducted himself with them as a gallant man should? And it was towards Lucie, whom he loved as he had never loved woman, that he had behaved like a veritable blackguard for the first time in his life!

"You love me, do you?" said she, scanning him in order to make more certain that he was trying to deceive her.

"Like a demon!" replied he, with the enthusiasm of sincere conviction.

"Very well, my dear fellow, you're wasting your time!"

"I know it, and that's why I will speak no more of this passion, the confession of which escaped me; but let me profit by the chance—a happy one for me, although disagreeable for you—which places you for an hour or two alone at my side. Since you jokingly offered me your friendship yesterday, permit me to merit it, and I shall hold myself satisfied beyond the summit of my desires."

"That suits me better," replied she, suddenly appeased, and cordially holding out her hand. "It is so jolly to be two good comrades!"

After a turn round the lake, she begged Hector to give the coachman the order for home. During the drive from the Arc de Triomphe to the Rue Taitbout, where De Méras had his chambers, they chatted familiarly, almost affectionately, she having recovered her smiling face, he very grave, and seeming quite anxious about the young actress's professional future. The lucky girl had all the elements of success, charming figure, physique, and a delicious voice, but needs must, if she wished to make her way rapidly, that she should be favoured by circumstances or—what was less doubtful—cleverly backed up. Hector flattered himself that he could be the devoted and disinterested protector who was indispensable to her. Was he asking so very much, then? He had a splendid connexion in the world of letters, which he knew well how to utilize in her favour. In the first place, he would speak very warmly of her to several journalists who were friends of his, and especially to some well-known dramatic authors with whom he was on intimate terms. The latter would write parts for her, and the former would keep her constantly before the public in their articles. Lucie was thankful to De Méras for the interest he manifested in her, and very grateful in advance for all that he was good enough to do for her.

When the brougham stopped in the Rue Taitbout, Hector, at the moment of taking leave of Lucie, whom he had offered to see home, proposed point-blank to her to go in and see his bachelor's chambers.

"But," she replied, with her little drolly modest air, "would it be the proper thing?"

"Nonsense! Two comrades!"

"True, of course, and since you assure me that my virtue is running no danger, I'll venture, and follow you!" she cried, springing lightly to the ground.

Hector walked on in front to show the way, and when they

got to his landing, drew a key from his pocket. As he put it in the lock he saw that she was looking at him, quite astonished.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Why, you didn't ring," she replied, as he threw the door wide open, and invited her to walk in. "Haven't you got any servant, then?—Confess, you're not much at home," she added, slyly.

"You are mistaken, my dear. I have a housekeeper, and she has plenty to do—"

"Out of doors! Well, you needn't make excuses to me, and when I come to see you it will not be necessary to turn your bed-room upside down to try and make me believe that you passed the night there."

She set to work to examine minutely the room in which they were. Articles of furniture of all shapes and shades were mingled in graceful confusion, cushioned arm-chairs, Louis XV couches, Henri II stools, fancy chairs, ottomans, lounges, covered, some in Genoa velvet, others in brocaded silk, plush, pompadour satin, all placed at hazard, crowded together pell-mell, and testifying by the brightness of their colours and the freshness of their coverings, to their long disuse.

"Not to be rude, how long have you had this furniture?" said she.

"Five or six years, more, perhaps, dear inquisitive one."

"Gracious! how careful you are! One would have thought it was quite new! Which is a proof," added she sententiously, "that economical people would do well never to sleep at home; I shall cite you as an example."

"Come, don't scold me. Besides, here is a nook which has not such a deserted air," he said, showing her the way into an adjoining boudoir, where walls and ceiling were in sky-blue velvet with a broad border of rose satin.

On the carpet of woollen pile were thrown, as if at hazard, white bear-skins, and a low, broad divan of the same colour as the hangings ran along the skirting.

In each corner were brackets in carved gilt supporting china vases or Saxony statuettes, and from the ceiling hung a lustre of Sèvres porcelain and cut bronze. Here and there, on fancy whatnots, were bon-bon boxes in cracked enamel, bronzes, onyx drinking-cups, crystal vases filled with bunches of artificial flowers: a profuse medley of costly trifles, a perfect nest of woman's luxury. And as if to give the room a still more feminine impress, it was filled with the musky odour of invisible sachets.

"Why, this is the temple of love!" said Lucie throwing herself on the divan, already slightly stupefied by the intoxicating perfume of the boudoir.

"You say truly, my pretty one," answered Hector, seating himself at her side. "Of all the women who have entered this sanctuary, not one has left it without yielding to me."

"In that case, I shall have to be an exception," said she, half rising.

He seized her at once by the wrist, which he pressed tightly enough to oblige her to sit down again.

"Oh! you have hurt me," said she, showing him the mark of his fingers on the discoloured flesh. "But I am strong," she added, looking him in the face.

"Strong against violence," replied De Méras, "but against true love—love which suffers, which implores?"

He had pressed his lips against those of the young girl.

"Is that your friendship?" said she, without drawing her head away, her lips half parted in a smile.

"Friendship—love—I know not, for you drive me mad!"

Lucie thrust him away coldly with her hand, and took a step to leave the boudoir.

"Ah, no, not yet!" he murmured between his teeth, and,

before she had time to recover herself, he threw her roughly on the cushions.

"That is cowardly," she murmured, flushed with anger.

When she rose to pick up her hat which had fallen on the ground, and arrange her rumpled hair before the glass, she had tears in her eyes.

"Won't you forgive me?" asked Hector in a low voice.

"No!" replied she, throwing on him a look of disgust.

And she walked towards the ante-room.

"You are going?" he asked, rushing after her.

"You can see that," replied she, slamming the door.

The next day he called on her and was immediately received.

"I knew you would not be angry with me long," said he.

"Don't be deceived, I'm angry with you still; but what use to struggle against destiny? Are not we women always forced to yield? I have been yours in spite of myself, but it is no less the fact; I may as well resign myself to be your mistress, for that is what you want, I suppose?"

She made the sacrifice of herself reluctantly, but he feigned not to notice it, being only too happy that she had accepted him. He was really very much in love with Lucie, and would have been very much cut up if she had repulsed him. And then, he saw in her the successful actress, the rage for whom would soon take the form of engagements at four or five hundred francs an evening. Now, he had a mania for celebrated mistresses who went the pace. The modesty of his own income not permitting him to keep them on the footing which he wished, he was glad enough to meet with those who were able from their own resources to pay for the style of life he exacted; he would not have borrowed a sovereign from them, but he was a pensioner on their luxury, waited on by their servants, fed by their cook, lodged in their house—was there anything in that which was not quite correct?

With his taste for a life of luxury he was especially anxious to have the entrée of a house which the presence of a princess of the footlights transformed into a little sovereign's palace, crowded all day with courtiers full of obsequiousness towards the favourite of their operetta queen; and it was always heart-breaking, after having fallen from favour, to re-enter his chambers in the Rue Taitbout, whose musty smell and dreary loneliness contrasted so mournfully with the sumptuousness and animation of the princely abode from which he had been banished.

"It flavours of the workhouse here," he murmured, and without delay he set out in search of some fresh queen who was in the market.

Lucie at this time had still only her apartments at twelve hundred francs in the Rue de Maubeuge, on the fourth floor. Thus, every time Hector mounted these endless stairs, he asked himself if he was not really making a fool of himself in coming thus to pay his court to a woman who, after all, had only hopes—and probably remote ones, like a penniless son whose name is in the will of an evergreen uncle; and he experienced on entering this modest lodging the same sense of uneasiness as a millionaire who has wandered out of his way to find himself in a garret. After a month of these ascents, becoming every day more distasteful, he signified to Lucie that she was to move as soon as possible.

"It is unpardonable," he declared, "that an artiste in your position should continue any longer to inhabit a shanty perched up aloft like this one. Lucie Guépin, the first singer of Paris, must have her mansion and carriages."

"What! are you going mad?" she replied. "My salary and your income together would not suffice to pay the servants and buy the horses' corn."

"Leave that to me, it's in my line, and you can safely trust the furnishing of your house in my hands."

Without saying a word to Lucie, he came to an arrangement with an upholsterer to whom he was in the habit of going under similar circumstances, and easily obtained his consent to let to the fashionable singer an already furnished house in the Rue La Boétie. The other tradesmen, jewellers, dress-makers, coach-builders, were not less accommodating, knowing, all of them, by experience, that they could with perfect safety give unlimited credit to the pretty girls who were patronized by Monsieur de Méras: the young man's mistresses were at a premium, capitalists fought for them, that mad De Kolbach especially, that great noodle with all his millions, who ran up the bidding in his anxiety to possess them. A week or so later, Lucie, as if some good fairy had taken her under her care, found herself transported into a delicious house all glittering with gold and quilted with silk, where she was received, on alighting from a victoria which bore her monogram, by a crowd of servants in her livery, and on the table in her bedroom lay glistening in their satined cases diamonds of fabulous water.

At the sight of these treasures collected under her dazzled eyes, Lucie imagined that Hector, endowed with some magic power, had realized on her behalf a story out of the "Arabian Nights."

"Oh, my beautiful sorcerer, I adore you!" she cried, throwing her arms round his neck.

The next day the enchanter, De Méras, presented to Lucie bills to the extent of sixty thousand francs, payable at three months date—that was the talisman, simple enough, too, which he had employed to conjure up all this luxury.

Lucie signed them without a remark, careless of the debt which she was contracting, but cruelly undecieved. She had so wished, the romantic little "diva," that it should all have been really a fairy tale !

CHAPTER VI.

"Did you see De Méras this afternoon in the Bois?" asked the Marquis de Séphano, on entering the Mirlitons. "He is up in the world again, so it would appear."

"Up in his carriage, my dear prince," replied Dorneval, who was playing écarté with one of the chief clerks in his ministry, from whom he had already won fifteen louis.

"In his carriage, indeed, for he has a superb turn out; two great beasts of steppers, who seem to have the manners of princes of the blood. Ah, the deuce, wherever does he buy his horses?"

"His horses? Say rather Lucie Guépin's horses."

"He drives them, at all events."

"A question of breaking in, my dear fellow. Besides, when the row comes the horses will remain the 'diva's' no less than the carriages," added Dorneval.

"And even the house," said the chief clerk, turning up the king.

"And you conclude from that—?" asked the marquis.

"Did we conclude anything?" said Dorneval.

"Excuse my question, but I am a foreigner, and the niceties and veiled meanings of your language generally escape me."

Upon this, everyone explained in his own way Hector's mode of life. One would have it that De Méras, on his arrival in Paris, had placed in his desk a million, and by the side of the million, a loaded revolver. The million was destined to

satisfy on the spot all his fancies and all his follies, without obliging him to apply to a notary or stock-broker, from whom the smallest sum can only be drawn after tedious formalities. Hector had always his capital under his hand, in rolls of a thousand louis each, and bank notes ; in order to realize, he had only to stretch out his arm. For ten years he had been drawing extravagantly on this store, the treasure must soon be exhausted ; some were even certain that there remained no more but a few rolls. But what mattered it to De Méras ? The revolver was there. The day when the last louis disappeared, a touch of the trigger, and good-bye, my boy ! According to another, Hector had simply inherited a fortune from some tropical nabob, and had not breathed a word about it, thinking to dazzle his friends and to hear said all around him, "What a man ! What a prodigy, to be able to throw money about like that with an income of only twenty-five thousand francs." But the greater number were certain that Hector had discounted his uncle's legacy, and squandered his sister's dowry. And, as proof that this was the true version, was the fact that the young girl did not marry, although everyone declared that she was charming. A few, more outspoken, or more slanderous, gave it to be understood that all De Méras's luxury depended on the credit which his tradesmen gave him. "They know well that their customer is not rich, but at the same time they are convinced that he will always find good-natured bankers to advance him money."

"Upon my word," said the marquis, "at this point I get lost again."

"That is because you are not aware that in France, and in Paris especially, we have bankers of both sexes," replied little De Mezor.

"Then I am very much astonished that you can give your hand to Monsieur de Méras," declared Séphano gravely.

"No one refuses to do so, and I am not more puritanical than anyone else."

"The marquis is right, it would perhaps be more correct to hold aloof," said the chief clerk.

At that moment De Méras entered, a smile on his lips, and with the confident bearing of a man who feels certain of a warm reception. The chief clerk was the first to go and meet him in order to congratulate him.

"We were talking about you, my dear fellow ; ah, what a turn out !"

"You saw it ?"

"No, but they have just been praising it."

"A caprice of Lucie's," said De Méras, modestly.

"He can refuse the ladies nothing !"

"And the little house ?—Dutar, the upholsterer, says he has surpassed himself. I am told it is killing," said De Mezor.

"Oh no, nothing out of the way—simply a little taste, a few well chosen knick-knacks, some stylish furniture, and, on the top of all that, a touch of eccentricity. Besides, you have only to say the word, gentlemen, to come and admire *de visu* these so-called marvels. Lucie's home is mine, that is equivalent to saying that you will all be favourably received."

"You hear that ?" said the marquis in De Mezor's ear ; "he professes to be at home, when he is really at Guépin's."

"Exactly ; he had better have said, 'My home is Lucie's.'"
And De Mezor added, as he left Séphano to go to De Méras', "There, marquis, there is another enigma of our infernal language."

They had just arranged a game at baccarat.

"Is it possible ? De Méras playing cards !" cried Dorneval.

"Why, yes, dear boy, behold me plunged once more in vice. And yet I had solemnly sworn, after my skinning at Berthe Pompon's—"

"Shall we be able to gamble in the Rue La Boétie?"

"Undoubtedly. How do you think one could pass the evening, or rather, the night? There is not room enough in my chambers in the Rue Taitbout, but here I have two magnificent saloons. Ah, we can go in for some heavy banks, and I advise you to provide yourself with plenty of money if you want to win much of me."

As he carried on this conversation he was losing with the indifference of a practised player.

"I'm in for six thousand; I'll retire!" said he, rising.

He looked at the time by the huge brass clock which adorned the chimney-piece. "A quarter to twelve!" he cried; "I must go and fetch Lucie."

"Ah, of course, she is singing still in the 'Beautiful Andalusian.' They say the receipts are enormous."

"The highest possible every evening—by-the-bye, supposing you gave me my revenge in the Rue La Boétie. We will sup with Lucie."

"Willingly," replied all the young men.

"It's agreed, then; Dorneval, bring these gentlemen, won't you?" said Hector, as he left the room.

He descended hastily the steps of the club; the brougham was waiting at the door. "To the Folies-Parisiennes, and drive quickly," he said to the coachman; "I'm late."

"Shall you go?" asked the prince of De Mezor, as soon as Hector was gone.

"Why not? If everyone else goes there—"

"Certainly, everyone else is going," declared Dorneval, "Hector is out of luck." And they all put on their overcoats and hats; at bottom, they were very curious to visit the new establishment.

The house in the Rue La Boétie had not been built on purpose for Lucie. The time occupied in choosing a site, agreeing upon plans, laying the foundations, and building,

stone by stone, a large house, would have been too tedious for the lovers, De Méras especially, in whose opinion the joys of love lay in immediate possession. And then, it would have been necessary in the first place to have bought land by instalments at a long price, unless it had been situated in a second-rate neighbourhood. Instead of which, Dutar, the upholsterer, had spared them this formidable outlay, in letting them the house, at a high price, no doubt, but which, regularly paid for ten years, would put them in possession of the property and furniture. And besides, it was a perfect gem, this François I building, with its frontage dotted with medallions, some in marble, others in bronze, with its corbelled windows, so delicate and so laboriously carved, its pointed, tiled roof, and its great stone fireplaces round which wound salamanders, their bodies glittering with scales. The entrance to it was through a small court-yard closed by double doors, and where were situated, on the left, the porter's lodge, and on the right, the servants' offices. A little lawn, in the middle of which played a fountain, issuing from a vase all decked with climbing plants, divided the two broad carriage drives which met in front of a double flight of steps. Nothing could have been more coquettish than these few marble steps, following the graceful curve of the balusters, and terminating at the entrance-door, where stood two bronze candelabra, the exact reproduction of those two chefs-d'œuvre in the choir of the church of Notre-Dame Della Salute at Venice.

From the top of this flight, one entered, on the same level, an entrance-hall adorned with trophies and low flower-stands ever full of bloom. The floor, in mosaic, harmonized to perfection with the variegated monster displaying its fantastic folds in the panels of the ceiling, opening an enormous mouth, whose dart-like tongue, furnished with a shaft of twisted copper, supported a rich Renaissance lantern of the

same metal. The broad stone stairs, covered with a carpet fastened down with gilt rods, and provided with magnificently carved balusters, and landings adorned with ferns growing in Japanese vases, led up to the first storey by almost imperceptibly-rising steps. On the right of the entrance hall were the dining and billiard rooms; on the left, two vast saloons, one in reddish-brown plush the other in olive satin. Here and there, as if placed at hazard, Oriental ottomans, foot-stools inlaid with mother-of-pearl, round tables in lapis lazuli or malachite, mirrored whatnots, electro-plated caskets and a hundred varieties of bronze statuettes, vases of glass or Hungarian crystal. And, casting on all this artistic medley the silvery sheen of their polished surface, like that of a Swiss lake, three or four large Venetian mirrors, in which were reflected two fringed palms which rose from great barbotine vases. On the first floor, private boudoirs, library, bedrooms. That of Lucie and Hector was all in black ebony, with sculptured garlands joined to one another by groups of cupids. The hangings and the large curtains in delicate bright blue cloth bore a pattern of these same garlands interspersed with cupids, but embroidered in deeper colours; a large cheval-glass threw a dim light on the cosy, quilted furniture which gave the room the look of a warm and amorous retreat. The two dressing-rooms, that of Monsieur and that of Madame, were hung from floor to ceiling with cretonne—bouquets of wild flowers on a light ground—and clinging to the walls were brackets supporting vases and bottles of all forms and shades. The jugs, water-bottles, and toilet-sets were of Bohemian glass—Monsieur's red, Madame's opal—blending deliciously with the brushes, hand-mirrors and powder-boxes in mother-of-pearl.

Hector and Lucie arrived in the Rue La Boétie a short time before their guests; they did the honours of their new

home to these latter, and then the company went at once into the dining-room where a cold supper was laid out and served by two servants in livery. Immediately after coffee, cards were brought, and from two until six in the morning the games went on uninterruptedly on the large table in the reddish-brown saloon. De Méras was the only loser ; to the tune of five thousand francs. Dorneval had spoken truly ; he was dead out of luck ; it was like picking up money to plunge against him. The run had set in at Kolbach's, where he was let in for twenty-three-thousand francs. This first loss had made some stir by reason of a doubtful stroke of luck of which Hector had been the victim, and which the "Figaro" had related, concealing no names. All Paris had learnt thus that De Méras had been forced to take a card of which the corner had been accidentally turned up : it was a four, which, falling on a six, had made him baccarat, and it was a question of eleven thousand five hundred francs ! Ah, it was hard lines !

Hector had waited until a few days after this occurrence before going to see his uncle, hoping to allow him time to forget, if even he had come to learn, these compromising stories. But Béraudy was not the man to attach so little importance to a reporter's indiscreetness which showed his nephew under an aspect which he had not suspected, that of a gamester. At the first glance which he threw on De Méras, the latter understood that the old man knew all.

"Ah, here you are ; I have been on the point of writing to you for the last few days, my boy, about a certain article which concerns you. You read the papers sometimes ?"

"Certainly, uncle, but—"

"For my part, I read them every day. To tell the truth, it is the only means by which I can learn any news about you, and this news is not always as satisfactory as I could wish. Thus, the 'Figaro' informs me that you gamble,"

“Do you believe in that tittle-tattle of a scribbler short of copy?”

“My dear lad, when a paper is guilty of an error which reflects unfavourably on you, you have always the right to exact a contradiction, and that is what you have taken good care not to do.”

“Well, but, uncle, without being false, the facts can be distorted, the figures can be multiplied, and what was only a harmless pastime, intended to beguile a few hours of the night, has all at once the importance of an irreparable fault.”

He added carelessly, “Do you remember, uncle, that celebrated statesman who made a boast that he could sentence anyone to death by writing two lines?”

“I would accept your poor evasion, if I was not aware that you lost six thousand francs more at the Mirlitons, the evening before last.”

“Your police is well organized, uncle.”

“My police is chance, which caused me to meet one of your fellow-clubmen; and to add to this, there is something which occasions me more sorrow still than your losses at play: it is the life you lead in company with your operetta-singer, and I have found myself asking in agony whether the son of the upright man who called himself Jean de Méras does not sponge upon his mistress.”

“Uncle!” cried the young man, bounding up at the insult, and pacing the room with long strides, a prey to violent agitation. Then, stopping suddenly in front of Béraudy, eyes flashing, pupils dilated, teeth clenched: “Ah! I swear that no other should insult me in this way with impunity!”

“Because you can use a sword? Do you think this bluster acquired by ten years of fencing-lessons can supply the place of honour?”

“And who throws a doubt on my honour? Am I not a

member of the two first clubs in Paris, the Mirlitons and the Union? And you are well aware that inquiry is made as to the moral standing of each candidate, before his admission. I should like you to be present when I enter one of them. You would see for yourself that they do not wait there for Monsieur Hector de Méras to hold out his hand, but that they rush to offer him theirs."

"There are certain marks of deference accorded in society to certain men, out of consideration for their family, and not as showing personal esteem."

"You are hard on me, uncle."

"I am what it behoves me to be," replied the old man firmly, "and I am obliged to play the part of head of the De Méras family, since he who should do so has shown himself such an imprudent trifler. It is in having as little care for one's dignity as you have, that one begins by dishonouring oneself and finally dishonouring all those who bear the same name. If I am thus severe, thus categorical, to-day, it is less on account of yourself, who will undergo—which will only be just—the consequences of your acts, than on account of your sister, whose life you will possibly ruin, in making her marriage an impossibility."

"As for that," cried Hector, drawing himself up to his full height, and seeing that they were about to touch on a subject where he would be able easily to recover all his advantage, "as for that, I am happily able to correct you. My sister, on the contrary, is in a position to make a rich and honourable match, in which her heart will find perfect satisfaction." And he informed his uncle, with all the assurance of a man who was defending a good cause, that his friend Lobel, a man of honour and merit, was deeply in love with Séverine.

When Monsieur Béraudy expressed his astonishment that, if such were the case, he had not revisited the Rue de l'Arcade

since his first brief appearance, Hector declared that his friend Lobel, believing Séverine to have a much larger fortune than his own, had preferred, with a just sense of pride, the *status quo*—in other words, to wait—to the possibility of a refusal. There was no foundation for his reasons; only they were sufficient to make a man of Armand's sensitive character hesitate.

"And whose fault is it," asked Béraudy, "that he believes your sister to be so rich?" He paused; Séverine entered, having been out with her maid.

"Your phaeton is at the door; I recognised your horse and servant, so I rushed upstairs, and here I am!" She kissed him effusively. "You are alone to-day?" she asked, freeing herself.

"Who did you think could be with me?"

"I said to myself—well, I thought—did not uncle give permission to your friend—to that gentleman with whom you went to the theatre the other night—?"

"If you think I'm going to help you to pronounce a name that you know better than I do, and which you have on the tip of your tongue—!"

"Of course, I remember it now—Monsieur Armand Lobel, isn't it?" said Séverine, blushing scarlet.

"We were just talking about him, uncle Béraudy and I, my dear Séverine, and I was saying that there is not the slightest doubt that he will pay you a visit before long."

"I hope, at least, that you won't prevent him. Besides, he is your most intimate friend; it is quite natural that he should come here often," and fearful that she had said too much she suddenly changed the conversation.

"I saw you in the Champs-Élysées."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Whoever was that lady you were with?"

"The wife of a friend," replied Hector carelessly.

"And the landau—and the horses, are they yours or the lady's?"

Hector was much embarrassed, feeling Béraudy's glance fixed on him with disquieting persistence. "Mine," replied he, after a moment's hesitation.

"Ah, how funny!" said Séverine. Then, after reflecting, "So then, I understand," she continued. "The carriage turned into the Rue La Boétie—you were going home—for you are very sly, my brother. He did not tell you, uncle, that he had left the Rue Taitbout. Master Hector, it appears, lives now in a delicious house in the Rue La Boétie. Oh, these young men! How artful they are!"

"Who has been putting this nonsense into your head?" asked uncle Béraudy quickly, as if to put his niece off the scent, so that she should not for a second suspect her brother's real life.

"It's not nonsense—the door-porter told my maid. You will show us your palace, won't you, Hector?" she begged. And turning to Monsieur Béraudy: "Would you believe it, uncle? His business must bring him in a lot of money, for him to keep a house and carriages!"

"His business," murmured the old man bitterly.

Hector thought it prudent to create a diversion. "Would you like to know, little sister," said he abruptly, "why Armand has not put in an appearance again here, although he is dying to do so?"

"Tell me, quick!"

"It is because he thinks you are too rich for him to dare to aspire to your hand."

"I, too rich for him!" she replied. "Rather it is he who thinks I am not quite good enough for him." Then, pouting: "Of course, it is you with your luxury who have frightened him," she continued. "By your style of life one

might think we had an income of two hundred thousand francs."

"You hear her, the innocent child!" murmured Béraudy in Hector's ear. "And yet it was not I who put this idea into her head."

CHAPTER VII.

BÉCHART, the father of Irma, Lucie Guépin's school-friend, had just entered the Beaux-Arts when he fell desperately in love with Juliette Troyat, daughter of the keeper of the eating-house where he took his meals. The mother did the cooking, the father served the customers, the daughter was at the counter. It was not from pleasure that the family attended thus in their own persons to the business, but it was absolutely necessary to have an eye to economy, for the establishment did not pay very well. The students who frequented it did not lay out much, and the majority even of them asked for credit. Thus the poor restaurant-keeper, taking no ready money, was forced to give bills to his tradesmen. The time came when they fell due, and the debtor was not always in funds; so he had to rush off to his creditor to try and melt his heart and obtain a renewal. This would be granted, but all goods would be mercilessly refused. One morning the baker declared that he would only deliver the day's provision for money down: impossible to satisfy him, the till was empty! Horrors of horrors! No bread in a house where it is usually free! Go and tell twenty-year-old appetites at breakfast-time that famine has suddenly swooped down on the capital because government has taken possession of the granaries or the baker's men have struck! Fortunately Troyat had a house-dog which a neighbour coveted, and he sold it to him—for a morsel of bread; for, alas, it was indeed so!

Sometimes it was the butcher who was obdurate. Then, up with the reserves ! Dried cod and potatoes formed the bill of fare. So much the worse for those who did not like fasting. It was vain for them to cry out at the top of their voices that in a restaurant where one orders what one likes, the choice of dishes should be varied ; their protests were fruitless, and from lack of something better, and of funds to go and satisfy themselves elsewhere, the cod and potatoes went down.

And besides, with one look, Juliette brought about a calm. She cast her beautiful suppliant eyes on the worst malcontents, who became silent at once in order to win the pretty girl's good graces. For they all paid court to her. After each meal they passed the counter in turn, leaning on it for a quarter of an hour together, gossiping with Juliette, who, her good-natured smile at the corners of her lips, looked at them silently with her two large, dark, disquieting eyes. Ah, that smile ! How Machiavelian, with its innocent expression ! If it was more fascinating than befitted a virtuous girl, at any rate it offended no one, and since each had a right to interpret it in his own favour, anyone who wished was at liberty to see in it the confession of a love too sincere to be declared openly. Such being the case, everyone who had once entered old Troyat's, returned thither during many years ; attracted and retained by that magic smile, the good genius of the place. Without it the house would have been deserted long enough ago, for how often had the least fastidious to complain about the food. But Mademoiselle Troyat smiled, and criticism was disarmed.

Béchart fell a victim to this charm above everyone else, and his love for the seductive Juliette was such as to take away all desire for eating and drinking. To speak the truth, that was no great loss at old Troyat's ! He avowed his love ; he was answered by the habitual smile. That was not

enough, for the good young fellow aspired to nothing less than the hand of his adored one, and he thought, and not without reason, that his matrimonial intentions were worth more than the cheap favours accorded to the common herd. The melancholy sadness with which all slighted lovers are devoured took possession of him; at all hours, at every instant, the sight of Juliette surrounded by gallants was to him a torture quickened each day by jealousy. After a month of it he could bear no more, his sufferings had become intolerable, and, since for serious diseases serious remedies are necessary, he resolved to propose. He was rejected. Yet Juliette had interceded for him, having been very much touched by the step taken by this youth whom she loved sufficiently to be willing to marry; but papa was inflexible.

“What have you to start housekeeping on, idiots that you are?” said he. “Besides, Juliette is useful to me, and I’m going to keep her.”

A refusal so categorical did not, however, cause Béchart to despair, and, certain now that his passion was shared, he resignedly awaited events. And he was right, for a short time afterwards Troyat had some money left him, sold his business, gave up to him his daughter, of whom he had no longer any need, and retired to the country.

During the first ten years of married life, Juliette and Béchart lived very happily, without either having to reproach the other with the slightest infidelity. Their mutual tenderness was, at least, a compensation for the vexations of their precarious existence: they were always impecunious, and, as in the days of old Troyat, the tradesmen were often implored to wait. But Juliette, having been brought up in a good school, knew how to set to work with them; if she paid them rarely, she was always wheedling them, and, thanks to her, they generally managed to keep the wolf from the door. Their heaviest expense was the schooling of

the little one, six hundred francs a year. Do what she might, they were always two or three terms behind-hand, and the schoolmistress was not accommodating. About every six months, she informed the parents that they must come and take their daughter away within forty-eight hours, or settle the arrears. The frantic mother would rush off on the spot to see her, implore her to accept something on account, most frequently to content herself with a promise, and she had such a persuasive manner that she always came home without having been obliged to bring Irma with her. And then, she was always gay in the midst of these incessant worries, having been too well broken to misery in her youth to be affected by the present embarrassment. Béchart was not less philosophical, being very temperate, very domesticated, and having few wants; but what preyed upon him and made him gloomy was the fact of not getting on, being as it were nailed to his salary of two thousand five hundred francs.

As years went by, his love for Juliette had become transformed into a feeling of friendship, and ambition had taken hold of him. He was eager to make his way, to occupy a position, to go for something in the administration, to be no longer a simple junior clerk, a cipher in society. He credulously believed that in order to free himself from the crowd, to rise to a prominent position, it sufficed to distinguish himself by close attention to work, and by intelligence. For this reason, he made a point of being the most hard-working and careful clerk in his office, happy when some difficult task presented itself, which, well done, would make him conspicuous. He comprehended, rather late in the day, that the least personal interest would have been much more profitable to him than all this useless zeal. His fellow clerks, less capable than he, obtained all the advancement, while he remained stationary, condemned

for ever to be a junior. This flagrant injustice cut him to the heart, and disgusted him with his work. Ah, if his situation had not been his only means of earning his bread, how he would have sent in his resignation, embittered as he was against a world in which favour is everything, and merit, nothing. In his hours of rage, revolutionary dreams fired his brain, until he longed to see Paris burning afresh under another Commune, to avenge him of his disappointments. The fit over, his good sense revolted against the extravagances into which it had drawn him, but, with calm, his despondency returned at the thought of the absolute impossibility of his ever winning a high position.

At last, one day, misfortune, which had relentlessly pursued him, seemed to weary; all at once, Dubosc, his chief, who hitherto had hardly spoken to him, evinced an unexpected interest in him, overwhelming him every six months with rises of salary and bonuses. A very close intimacy was even established between the powerful functionary and his inferior, who dined at one another's houses, and whose wives saw a great deal of each other. Béchart was trying to divine the reason of the sudden sympathy which he had inspired, when he discovered a letter from his chief to Juliette. The explanation which he sought was completely furnished by this note, signed, "Your Charles, who adores you." It was clear enough now; Dubosc was Juliette's lover, and had favoured the husband as a recognition of the kindness of the wife. Ah! a nice kind of thing—advancement obtained by such means; Béchart was ashamed. And he who had imagined in his simplicity that his salary had been almost doubled in two years solely to recompense him for the disappointments of the past, and to conspicuously reward his industry. What a simpleton he had been! In his first burst of indignation, he had been on the point of going and cuffing his chief, at the risk of being dismissed for his want

of respect for authority. But he had not had much difficulty in persuading himself that such a scandal would cause him to look ridiculous, and, at the same time, deprive him of his means of existence. To be cuckold and destitute—it would have been making too great a fool of himself! Besides, why blazon abroad his conjugal misfortunes? It was dirty linen, which it was wise not to wash in public. He laughed heartily at his first revulsion of feeling, which he had not been able to overcome; if he had not checked himself, he would have been homeless now, whilst, if he kept quiet, fortune was before him. His mind was soon made up, and since he was making terms with his conscience, he might just as well abandon all scruples at once, and not do things by halves, from a lingering shame.

He called his wife. “You are Dubosc’s mistress?” said he, point-blank.

The accusation was brought forward with such confidence that she understood that all protest would be vain, and she sank down on her knees, pale, and trembling with fear.

“Oh, I forgive you, but on one condition.”

“What is that?” she asked feverishly.

“It is that you will not break with him till I think fit,” he replied cynically. She thought he was joking, only to abuse her more harshly afterwards, and her terror overcame her again. As she did not move, he seized her under both arms to help her to rise.

“I am serious,” he said. “Come, get up, I am no longer angry with you.”

Yes, of course, he was serious. Juliette’s first infidelity had produced effects too salutary for him not to advise her to commit more. Only, for the future, it was he who took upon himself to choose her lovers, for, if he allowed himself to be deceived, it was his will that it should be with persons who would be useful to him. To conclude, he imposed the

most absolute disinterestedness on Madame Béchart ; she was to mercilessly refuse all offers of money, and even presents, however insignificant. If the husband was ambitious it would have been distasteful to him to be thought venal !

Béchart's preference was for the chief-clerks, all those having the ear of the under secretary of state, and it brought him luck, for, thanks to them, he made his way rapidly. Through one, he became chief under-clerk at four thousand francs, through another, second chief-clerk, and Dorneval got him decorated. And then, Juliette had a weakness for these gentlemen. The majority of them were young, in society, handsome fellows occasionally, and Madame Béchart had a fancy for a good many of them, and a real fancy. It was a case of profound despair, bursts of tears every time it became necessary to separate, and during a certain time the separations were frequent ! Forsooth ! every month a minister fell, carrying with him in the crash the chief-secretary, and Béchart's permission only extended to chief-secretaries in office ! Still, he allowed the photographs of the ousted ones to be in the album.

Lobel, Hector's friend, Séverine's partner, was favourite for the time being. Never had Juliette loved with such ardour, never had man produced such a violent impression on her heart and senses ; it was frenzy, madness, and yet Béchart found his wife too reserved. He urged her unceasingly.

"Ah, yes, adore him, your Lobel !" he repeated. "Let him be your god, as he will be mine. Cast yourself at his feet. He is the coming man, the rising sun, the intimate friend of Cardillan the future dictator, he will be the disposer of all the places. Through him I shall become not only chief-secretary, but perhaps—but certainly—guardian of a museum, director of Sèvres or the Gobelins, for my twenty

years of service in the museums office are a more than sufficient title to these high functions. And it will not be a day too soon for our manufactories or museums to be administered by a competent man."

All these chief-clerks had the less scruple at being enamoured of the seductive Juliette, since they sincerely believed that she was the second-clerk's sister-in-law. This invention of a sister-in-law was an idea of Béchart's. He said to himself that the chief-secretaries so frequently invited by him to dinner would hesitate, from a very natural delicacy, to appropriate the wife of the most hospitable of Amphitryons; whilst a sister-in-law, that was of no consequence. He was apprehensive, too, that Juliette's escapades might be bruited about, and that, surprised that he stood it with patience, they would suspect him at the office of being a too complacent husband. But could a brother-in-law be responsible for the misconduct of his sister-in-law? However, he always insisted, even since the commencement of their new relationship, that appearances should be kept up; so he forbade Juliette to sleep out, and one night they had a very violent scene because she did not come home till four o'clock in the morning. It was really too shameless! he declared. And besides, if the porter had noticed it, the whole neighbourhood would know all about her freak next day!

That which had had the greatest share in determining Béchart to pass off Juliette as the widow of his brother, who was supposed to have been killed during the war, was the strapping Irma, already nearly twenty. To confess to a daughter of that age was equivalent to exhibiting a certificate of birth, and Juliette's dated from 1841. Yes, young as she appeared to be, pretty as she was, she was full forty. It would have been most awkward to have revealed to her gallants this chronological detail, which, destroying

their illusions, might have cooled them. So Irma had been taught her lesson, and for a long time past she only looked upon herself as her mother's niece. At first she had had all the difficulty in the world to make the change which was imposed on her, and it often happened to her to say "mamma" instead of "aunt." But she had got into the way of it now, and never made a mistake. If she did not cause Béchart any more uneasiness on this account, she did so in a different way. Was she not always taking it into her head that she would come out at a music-hall? Her father had formally opposed it, but she clung to the idea, waiting patiently till she was of age, which would happen shortly, to take an engagement. Béchart gave up attempting to prevent her having her own way, but at the least he insisted that she should not sing under her own name. Thanks; it would be too disgraceful to have a daughter a music-hall singer. And then, he mistrusted those cursed boards, where the most virtuous go wrong. But Irma was forewarned: if ever she yielded he would kill her. The honour of his name before all! Lobel, too, had been lately a source of uneasiness to the second-clerk. He was growing cooler towards Juliette, more and more every day; it was evident.

"If only he loves no one else," said Béchart very anxiously, one evening when his wife and he had vainly awaited the young man.

"Oh! I should advise him not to!" cried Juliette, her eyes blazing with jealousy, "for his wench and he would pass a bad quarter-of-an-hour!"

CHAPTER VIII.

JARLY was decidedly right: De Méras was truly the man-Mascotte. Lucie had been his mistress but a few days when success came to him—rapid, enormous. The “Beautiful Andalusian,” which hitherto had only realised very modest receipts, just paying expenses, was played to packed houses every night. Between the acts, after the play, the public were unanimous in declaring that the libretto was idiotic and the music hackneyed, but was enthusiastic over the little star, whose talent was the greater and more incontestable that it was exhibited in a bad part. With what finesse and tact she delivered the indecent song! In her mouth improper expressions did not shock, having all the piquancy of an improper expression escaping the lips of a virtuous woman. She breathed them forth so prettily, with such an innocent air, her eyes were so chaste, her smile so simple, that she appeared not even to understand their indelicacy. And when the audience gave out a murmur of affrighted modesty, she looked at it quite confounded, with the astonishment of a little girl who has given vent unconsciously to some coarse expression. Many were even convinced that this artlessness was not put on, and that Lucie was really the innocent child that the papers maintained her to be. The infatuation went on increasing, fanned by Hector’s active canvassing and the puffs in the American style with which the director of the Folies-Parisiennes filled the papers. All this advertising campaign was so cleverly conducted, and the stir was such

that in three weeks Guépin had become a celebrity: her name, displayed on the bills in gigantic letters, was in every mouth, and the Folies-Parisiennes drew the public at the expense of the rival theatres. It was "the thing" among men about town to pose as lovers of the fashionable singer. "My dear fellow, I am clean gone on her!" was a stock phrase, a regular refrain on the boulevards, which had become quite hackneyed, but which was reiterated again and again because it was the fashion.

The man who wished to be in the latest style had only to boast of having won Guépin's favours—quoted at a fabulous figure—and in the schools the pupils kissed the actress's photograph in her señora's low-necked costume, with all the ardour of their fifteen years, behind the lids of their desks. Every evening the porter's box was crammed with bouquets brought by Rosita's admirers. The majority concealed notes, tender or ardent, timid or impudent, according to the temperament of their authors. Frequently the flowers were accompanied by a case containing a bracelet or a set of jewellery.

Lucie heaped up in a corner of her dressing-room—her flower garden, as she called it—the cargo of roses and camellias which were sent to her daily, without even taking the trouble to read the givers' names, inscribed on a card or at the foot of a proposal. She even wished to restore to the proper quarter the first jewels which were sent her. It was Hector who dissuaded her, and with some difficulty.

"And yet," said she, "it is not very delicate on my part to accept these brilliants from a gentleman whom I do not know, and whom, moreover, I do not wish to know."

"Oh, nonsense," objected De Méras, "why offend a courteous man by refusing his presents? It is enough not to thank him. If you refuse them, he will only give them to someone else."

The most enterprising, who had not been discouraged by Lucie's indifference, presented themselves at her house in the Rue La Boétie during Hector's absence, and, as was only right, were not admitted; a few well-known personages in the financial and political worlds tried the same experiment, and were dismissed like the others. Exception only was made in the case of De Kolbach, introduced, to tell the truth, by Hector himself, who, to reassure Lucie at once, gave him out to her as the most well-conducted of bankers, which, after all, was not saying very much.

"He is one of your most fervent admirers," he declared in the young girl's ear; as he introduced him to her, "but a platonic admirer. That which he finds seductive in you is the artist, and not the woman, and you will the more readily believe me, because at his age—"

Lucie smiled. "He is sixty at the most," she replied, "and yet he dyes. One can see plainly that he has pretensions."

"What a great mistake!"

After the banker's first visit, Lucie could not help saying to Hector: "You know your Kolbach has a way of looking at me and kissing my hand which is rather passionate for a gentleman who is only in love with my talents."

"Conceited little thing!" said Hector, turning round on his heel.

"After all's said and done, let him pay me attentions or not, you have nothing to fear, for he is hideous, and I love you," declared Lucie.

"Of course you do, as if I wasn't certain of it—what are you thinking of? Go along, child!"

And it was true enough she loved Hector, and with all her heart, now. At first she had been indifferent to him, infatuated as she was with her Blaiziot; she had even once had an aversion for him—not for long—after the scene in the

Rue Taitbout, where he had taken advantage of her in such a cowardly way. But since then he had exhibited so much activity in bringing her forward, he had served her interests with such intelligent zeal, he had always shown himself so affectionate, so attentive, that, gratitude coming to her aid, she was really in sympathy with him. She even asked herself sometimes if it was not true love with which he inspired her, for otherwise, would she have been so jealous?

And this confounded man was the cause of so much uneasiness, with his Lovelace's reputation, which was only too justified! He still had relations with a number of women, who wrote to him often, much too often; some had even the brazenness to pursue him in his club, and to throw glances to him under Lucie's nose! Among them all there must be some whom he liked. Had he strength to resist the temptation? Alas! she was very doubtful of it! Happily, up to the present she had had no proof of it, for there, really, it would have been a great grief to her to know that she was being deceived.

The Bécharts, to compose her, assured her that De Méras had become a veritable little saint since he had been with her. She had metamorphosed him. He, such a gay spark before, was now the most faithful of lovers. Oh, not the least freak to reproach himself with! They would have sworn it on their bared breasts, and it was by the sole charm of her ravishing little face that the "diva" had worked this wonder.

Madame Blaiziot was much less credulous. According to her, Hector was by no means such a reformed character as they professed. The devil does not become a monk in one day like that, and she had good reason to suspect certain flaws in the contract. In face of these diverse opinions Lucie did not know what to think. After all, Madame Blaiziot did not express herself very clearly, and when the

"diva" begged her to explain herself fully, the good lady took refuge in evasions.

"Ah, well," added she, "it's a small matter to me what Monsieur De Méras does or does not. Remember, my darling, that if I come to see you often, it's certainly not for you always to be talking to me about this gentleman."

And she led the conversation back as soon as possible to her son, her dear Oscar, "the poor exile!" That very morning the mail had brought her news of him, very sad news. The unfortunate fellow was destitute in Rio-de-Janeiro. Alas! yes! The director had failed, and the company had not been paid! It served the idiot right, who had cancelled Oscar's engagement a few days before bolting! And why? Because a scandal had been got up by a cabal, and Blaizinot had been hissed because of his political opinions! So, naturally, the best actor gone, the theatre had speedily closed its doors. Meanwhile, Oscar had not a sou towards paying his passage home, and it was a cruel thing for a mother's heart!

"So I count on you alone, my darling, to aid me to bring him back to his native land. With a thousand-franc note the thing would be done, and a thousand francs for you, in your position, is a trifle, isn't it so?"

Lucie, looking very sorry, and being much embarrassed and really pained at not being able to oblige Madame Blaizinot, answered simply: "The fact is, my dear friend, I am far from being as rich as you think, and I declare to you that at the present moment I have not the sum you need to dispose of."

At this answer, which she was far from expecting, the old woman gave a start, and her face took an evil expression. "Quite so," she replied after a moment's silence, her voice trembling with scarcely-disguised anger, "and your hardness of heart does not surprise me; it is usual with upstarts of your description." And in a theatrical tone, like that in which her son poured forth his tirades, she continued: "And

yet, your luxury, your wealth, your celebrity, in fact, everything, it is to Oscar and myself that you owe all! We both sacrificed for you a part of our existence. Without that poor darling, without his lessons, in which he poured into you all his artistic soul, you would be grovelling still in the low ranks of the chorus; he has destroyed his whole career, his whole future, to make you what you are, and I, his mother, encouraged him in this disinterested course. Ah, to have nourished her in weariness and privation for her to trample under foot so many remembrances! But why remind ungrateful people of the services with which one has loaded them?"

"Oh, madame!" interrupted Lucie in a sad and gentle voice, as if to protest against the acensation brought against her.

"Come, come," continued Madame Blaizinet angrily. "don't deny our kindness to you. I suppose we didn't take you in when you were destitute and homeless, on the death of your uncle, your only relation? And yet we, too, were far from rolling in money. But beggars help one another, not the likes of you, though! You don't remember that in those days you were a wretched little seamstress earning your three francs and a half a day, which wasn't much for three of us to live on; not to mention that you would have mended dresses all your life if it had not been for that poor Oscar who had pity on you and advised you to go on the stage! No, no, but tell me that I'm lying, say again that he didn't teach you to sing and act. And you rewarded him for his devotion by forsaking him for another, who most certainly is not as good as he is! You, too, were the cause of the poor child leaving France in despair, preferring to separate from his mother to witnessing your treachery." She snatched her handkerchief from the pocket of her dress, and covered her face with it, as if the sight of

Lucie inspired her with horror, "Yes," she cried, more and more loudly, her voice shaken with sobs, "it is you, and you alone who have robbed me of my son!"

Lucie wept too, her head hanging, and herself looking quite crushed, as if she had really deserved all the ridiculous reproaches which the old fury heaped on her. In the state of confusion into which these invectives had thrown her, she had concluded by thinking that Madame Blaiziot's indignation was justifiable. Yes, the mother and son, hard-working as they were, had extended to her their hospitality for a period of three years, and it was really at Osear's instigation that she had given up her dressmaking to take an engagement in the chorus at the Folies-Parisiennes. Who then, if not he, and he alone, had marked out her course? The excellent girl, led away by her good nature, forgot that with her paltry wages of three francs and a half a day, she had fed the Blaiziots during the whole of her stay with them, and that her benefactors had only urged her to go on the stage in order to be able to get more out of her.

"You are very hard on me, madame," said she, her eyes still full of tears. "It was unfortunately only too correct, when I told you that I was short of money, for you don't know, perhaps, that an upholsterer lets me this house. I am only in furnished lodgings here—better furnished than the others, that's all, and I only got all this tinsel with which I am surrounded by accepting bills, large bills, which are nearly due. And I am wondering," she added with a melancholy smile, "how it will be possible for me to honour my signature."

"That's all nonsense," declared Madame Blaiziot. "You've a splendid salary."

"It will be so, perhaps, but as a matter of fact, I only get a thousand francs a month. Jarly is rather mean."

"He's a blackguard who swindles you, but you are too

silly, too! With your reputation, you ought to be well paid, though the devil opposed it!"

"Oh, don't be alarmed, I shall only renew my engagement on favourable terms! But now, let us think of what's most pressing; Oscar's situation cuts me to the heart, and, cost what it may, I'll get him out of it!"

Sherose and walked to the chimney-piece on which an electroplated casket was lying. She opened it and drew out a bracelet of emeralds and brilliants. "Do me the favour," said she, giving the trinket to Madame Blaizinot, "to accept this. You can sell it or pledge it, as you please, and send what it fetches to your son; so that he may come back to your arms with all speed! I hope there will be something left over for you too, poor dear, for you must be rather hard up."

"Oh, for my part, I suffer without complaining, and don't ask anyone for anything," said the old woman in a cold and dignified manner.

As she spoke she fingered the precious stones whose glitter seemed to be reflected in her eyes sparkling with satiated covetousness. "Then, your De Méras is really short of cash for you to be obliged to pop your jewellery?" said she suddenly, tearing her eyes away from the contemplation.

"Yes—just now. It will soon blow over."

Madame Blaizinot shut the bracelet in the case which Lucie had brought her, and walked hastily towards the door, as if from fear that the young woman, repenting of her fit of liberality, should change her mind and take back again the present so generously offered. In the doorway, just as she was about to disappear, seeing that the actress did not call her back, she turned round abruptly:

"By-the-bye, poor little duck, excuse me! I never said good-bye to you—it's my emotion!" And, returning towards Lucie, she bestowed on each cheek a damp and sounding

kiss. "Well, I shall see you again soon; God help you out of your trouble!" And she left the room with mincing steps which made her thick layers of fat shake ludicrously.

The Bécharts were more assiduous even than Madame Blazinot in their visits to Lucie. They dined there three or four times a week, and almost every day, Irma and Juliette drove about Paris in the carriage and pair which the "diva" had placed at their disposal. Very elegant they were too, both of them, looking quite grand in their turn-out, thanks to their good friend Lucie's dresses, altered to fit them, and which they had taken out of her wardrobe before she was even sick of them.

They had an infallible means of discounting the young woman's presents. "My darling," they would say to Lucie, "you must not be offended at our frankness, but you had a dress on yesterday which did not suit you at all, there, not in the least!"

"Well then, be kind enough to take it off my hands."

They hastened at once to mingle their thanks. "There, there," replied the actress naively, as if ashamed at having nothing better to offer, "it's not such a splendid present I'm making you."

It was at Lucie's, when she was yet a chorus singer, that Juliette Béchart had first met Lobel. Their connexion had begun in the Rue de Maubeuge, and, thanks to the efforts of Juliette and Béchart, it was still carried on in the Rue La Boétie. But Armand came rarely; he only put in an appearance at the house for a little while from time to time. Madame Béchart suffered tortures, and complained of such coolness, for which there was no reason, as she said. Béchart appeared to be more put out than his wife. Why these incomprehensible absences on the part of the young secretary? Were they perchance intended to prepare Juliette gradually for an approaching separation? Or else, was Lobel simply

kept away by business? Béchart doubted it, knowing that, however absorbed in work one may be, one can always find an hour or two to spare, in which to rush off and embrace one's mistress. If he had been ill one could have excused him. But to stop away thus for a fortnight without giving a sign of life, it was in defiance of all good manners. Might not Armand be keeping out of sight in order to escape from the importunities of his friends who knew his entry into office was imminent?

"Ah, by Jove, I should like to see him do it!" said Béchart.

What! on the eve of becoming chief secretary to the future President of the Council he would have the baseness to abandon his comrades who were counting on his protection to obtain advancement!

He would be guilty of the cruelty, the infamy, in twenty-four hours, without preparation, at the risk of killing him, Béchart, of thus destroying hopes ardently entertained for long months past! For, after all, the second clerk had only flattered and made much of Lobel for so long, he had only tolerated the young man's guilty intimacy with Juliette, in the absolute certainty that these attentions, that this complacency, would occasion his speedy nomination to the chief clerkship. And this nomination would soon depend solely on Lobel, the private secretary, the confidant of Cardillan, the leader of the Chamber, the great head of the majority, in one word, the famous minister of the near future, whose programme was already known to and appreciated by all.

Really, Lobel chose an unfortunate time to get tired of his sister-in-law. Let their amours only have lasted three weeks longer and Béchart's nomination would have been signed. And he cursed these infernal women who hold a man's future in the folds of their petticoats. There was no help

for it ; without them, in these beastly offices, one was condemned to vegetate for ever in the lowest posts. And that awkward Juliette, who had not been clever enough to keep hold of Lobel !

“Madame Béchart,” said he one day to Lucie, “must have offended Armand in some way. It’s an age since he set foot in our house.”

“You are out of it, my boy,” replied the actress, “Juliette has nothing to reproach herself with in regard to her little Lobel, who simply is in love with some one else.”

“Who’s that ?” cried Béchart, turning pale.

“Hector’s sister, Mademoiselle Séverine.”

“And he’s going to marry her ?”

“Of course !—A lady in society ?”

Béchart reeled beneath this unforeseen blow which simply ruined his career, and a minute or two were necessary for him to recover himself and collect his thoughts.

“Very good ! this marriage shall not take place,” he growled in a threatening tone, but low enough for Lucie not to hear it.

Through whose influence would he get a lift now ?

Béchart had no powerful friends, and it was with the sole intention of making some that he frequented Guépin’s house with so much constancy.

But there was the little idiot, as if she wanted to play him a trick, turning away deliberately all the notabilities who presented themselves, professing that politicians were anything but amusing. Ah ! if she had not refused them admittance into her drawing-room, wouldn’t he have fawned on these gentlemen, paid court to them to get a lift from them at an opportune time. If Lucie had been more accessible, he, humble, lost among the crowd of quill-drivers, would have been able to aspire to the highest positions. For ever those cursed petticoats ! one could not take a step

without coming across them and getting one's feet entangled in them. And who were the habitués of this house where he would have wished to meet useful people only? Robert Mimès, a sorry musician, who was kicking his heels and waiting until a manager consented to ruin himself by playing his compositions, and the librettist Anatole Pipert, his collaborator. A nice sort of collaborator, whose poems were the lucubrations of Robert Mimès, who let him take all the credit both for words and music in consideration of the sum of five hundred francs a month, and all author's rights, in case the piece was played; but up to the present this latter remuneration had been purely moral. Anatole Pipert had, it is true, the means, with his thirty thousand francs a year, to look on the drama only from the point of view of the reputation it gives, and not of the money which it brings in. He only had his pieces written for the sake of the honour and glory, contenting himself with having attributed to him the paternity of works of which he was not the author. The enjoyment of this conceit cost him much. In fact, it was his greatest expense, but it satisfied his appetite for notoriety, and one is never mean when it is a question of a vice to be satisfied! And what then? His most cherished hope, his constant care, his fixed idea was to become a figure in the world of letters, to pass for a man of talent, which, as nature had refused him any, he bought artificial. It was a luxury, and all luxuries have to be paid for.

How he intrigued, how he demeaned himself to issue from his obscurity! From time to time, by dint of persistence, he got an important paper to announce—not the reception of one of his pieces (for they were never of the kind that are played), but the conclusion, it might be of an operetta, or a vaudeville. It was, whilst acting as a bait to directors (who never bit), a pretext for revealing his name to thousands of readers. But after all, he was at a loss to think out some

eccentricity which would succeed in making the press talk about him.

As often as any well-known person, artist, financeier or politician gave a reception, he got himself invited, and to draw attention on himself at all hazards, he let off crackers in every corner, imitated with his mouth the sound of the drum or clarionette, or played the piano with his nose, his opera hat, or his punch-glass. One night, at a masked ball given in the demi-monde, he entered with a young woman on his arm dressed out as a bride, her hair and breast hidden beneath an avalanche of orange blossoms, and showing unmistakable signs of being confined at any moment; the marriage ceremony followed. This was received with great applause, which was only right, for he had been a whole week organising the farce at his own expense. He renewed these absurdities at supper-parties celebrating successes—which decidedly were not his own!—and sometimes a compassionate reporter accorded him a line or two in a paper. A play of his was performed once, though, hut in a drawing-room, and it was only a poor little piece in one act, not supposed to have any pretensions, and which most certainly had no wit. The audience was indulgent and well-bred. “The Cotton Cap”—that was the title of the production—was warmly received. The next day, to celebrate and perpetuate his triumph, Anatole ordered at a jeweller’s a little gold and enamel cotton cap, mounted as a pin, which he wore always in his tie. The same emblem soon afterwards adorned his cards and note paper.

Yet “The Cotton Cap” was entirely from the pen of Robert Mimès, who had authorised his collaborator to put his name only to it. The good Robert persisted none the less in his opinion that Pipert was not absolutely incapable; on the contrary, he attributed to him the most biting, the most observant, the most Parisian wit, and at the same

time talents the most dramatic, the most gifted of the day. To tell the truth, he had not to deal with an ungrateful person, and Pipert paid him back his admiration in large doses: although the maestro had only had five or six ballads sung at music-halls, the librettist proclaimed him to be the most original, the most popular composer of the present time; so that, between them, and them alone, they were at the head of the dramatic and musical movement in France. But however enthusiastic Pipert was about Mimès, the latter had a still higher opinion of himself; with the most perfect good faith he accredited himself with genius, and maintained, with a persistency grotesque in its sincerity, that a few envious people only disputed it. The most trifling air which issued from his brain, seemed to him to be worth the "Huguenots" and "Don Giovanni" together.

Was not a well-turned sonnet by him as good as a long poem? So, imbued with this blind confidence in the superiority of his music, he sang it from morning to night, convinced that his auditors experienced as much pleasure at being sated with it as he did. However, the two authors were about to brave the fire of the real foot-lights. Lucie, in fact, had formally promised them that during the summer she would act their "Bohemian," an unpublished monologue; oh! yes, unpublished! So that from fear that the "diva's" good intentions towards them should happen to change—pretty women so often abuse their right of being capricious—Pipert and Mimès had taken their stand at their future interpreter's side, never leaving her an instant, mounting guard about her, unmanageable, keeping off and slandering unmercifully all rivals, and praising up their effusion directly she appeared less enamoured of it.

By dint of servility and attentiveness they had finally rendered themselves indispensable, true footmen charged with all the "diva's" errands, who sent them in turn, five or

six times a day, to her hair-dresser's or milliner's, her boot-maker's or dressmaker's, and left to them the management of the most trifling details of the house.

Such was Lucie's usual society, society which Béchart was obliged to put up with, and which could be of no service to his much wished-for advancement. Dorneval, however, was one of the pillars of the house. Dorneval, chief secretary to the present minister of the Beaux-Arts, Lorédan Goulot. De Méras, too, made much of Dorneval, being very desirous of remaining friendly with him in order to have weight with the theatre managers, whose go-between he was in their dealings with the administration. Béchart, also, had been on the best of terms with Dorneval, quite lately even, when he was endeavouring to obtain his decoration. But since the young man had designated him for it, the new chevalier of the Legion of Honour had been very cool to him. His icy attitude towards Dorneval was easily explained. According to general report, the chief secretary had been Juliette's lover for several months, and Béchart, out of respect for public opinion, was forced to keep at a distance the seducer of such a near relation; then, the minister, and, as a consequence, his secretary, were on the point of dismissal, and every official, falling, or about to fall, inspired the second clerk with an invincible aversion. He was a man for the future, never for the past! Besides, Dorneval was a pretentious fool, who, for instance, had so far debased his title as to cause to be played in subsidized theatres some idiotic verses of his own. And Lorédan Goulot, his patron! There was a man who, if he had had no fiascos on the boards, had had some celebrated ones elsewhere.

One day, he learns that the Queen of England, stopping in Paris incognito, is to visit the Louvre in the afternoon. He rushes off to the museum at one o'clock precisely, and walks backwards and forwards in front of the principal en-

trance for nearly fifty minutes, awaiting the arrival of the sovereign, and turning over in his mind the complimentary welcome he will give her.

At last a landau drawn by two spirited horses approaches from the Place du Carrousel, draws up in front of the Pavillon de l'Horloge, and a middle-aged and aristocratic lady gets out, leaning on the arm of a respectable footman, whilst two delicious young girls spring lightly to the ground. The three women exchange a few words in English.

"Without the slightest doubt," thinks Lorédan, "here is sure enough her Britannic Majesty, accompanied by two maids of honour!" And he goes at once with hasty steps to meet the ladies, his back bent, opera hat in hand, for he had his opera hat, his white tie, and his black coat, the unfortunate wretch!

"Will your Majesty," he murmurs, in a voice choking with emotion, and forgetting in his anxiety the nonsense he had made up, "will your Majesty permit me to do in her behalf the honours of our national museum and our master-pieces of art?"

"By all means, sir," replies the old lady, "with many thanks for your courtesy!"

He offers his arm, the lady takes it, and two by two they enter the hall leading to the upper storeys. Goulot conducts the noble strangers through all the rooms, informing them of the subjects of the pictures, the name, and the date of the birth and death of the painter, relating curious anecdotes, estimating approximately the almost incredible value of each picture, and all the time humbly saluted by the attendants. After playing the part of the polite cicerone, he conducts the ladies back to their carriage.

"Your Majesty," says he, bowing and taking his leave, "appears satisfied. What an honour for France!"

"Majesty, I? But I am a governess and these are my

pupils," replies the minister's queen, pointing to the two young ladies.

Poor Goulot ! What a deception ! He who had thought to win that day the Order of the Garter ! Fortunately the hours of office of this foolish minister were numbered. Another frequenter of the Rue La Boétie was Kolbach, who had already begun to pay court openly to Lucie. The banker's assiduity and the object he had in view were a mystery to no one : De Méras alone seemed not to notice them. So the "diva," annoyed by the financier's importunity, took upon herself to speak to her lover about it. She began by complaining of Kolbach's attitude, and when Hector remained silent,

"At any rate, through whom has he learnt the state of our finances?" she cried, "for I wish you to know everything. No later than yesterday he offered me the money necessary for the payment of my bills, sixty thousand francs, if you please !"

"Well, isn't it a very praiseworthy offer?" replied De Méras, tranquilly. "It seems to me he is showing his generosity and his affection for you. Ah ! friends like him are rare," he added with a sigh.

"Then you would have me—accept ? But perhaps he will prove exacting for his sixty thousand francs ?"

"Ha, ha, what a joke !—Kolbach exacting ! May I be hanged if he's ever anything but a father to you ! And besides, some day or other, you can pay him back ! Accept, of course !"

CHAPTER IX.

A FEW days after, at half-past eleven, De Maurèves and Robin, two old friends of Kolbach's, entered Durand's. As they traversed the room on the ground floor, they saluted the lady at the counter with the bow of regular customers, and at the foot of the staircase leading to the private rooms on the first floor, took hold of the hand-rail with the same movement, and mounted the steps one by one with heavy tread. They stopped, out of breath, on the landing, and were received by the manager, who had come to meet them. "You are the first, gentlemen, as usual," said he with a smile, after a profound bow.

"What! None of the ladies here?" asked De Maurèves, not yet having recovered his breath.

"Not one, sir."

"For ever unpunctual," growled Robin. "At any rate, we will have a glass of madeira, while we are waiting for them."

De Maurèves and he walked into a large room, all furnished in red velvet, and in the middle of which stood a table laid for eight. The manager helped them, one after the other, to take off their overcoats, which he placed, carefully folded, on an arm-chair, underneath their hats.

"Come, pour out the wine, Charles," said Robin, pointing with his finger to a bottle standing on the side-board with some little traced glasses.

When the manager had left the room, De Maurèves went

and planted himself in front of a mirror to touch up with his hand his scanty dyed hair, and twirl up with his finger and thumb the point of his moustache, which was drooping a trifle. On turning round, he saw Robin, who was just finishing re-arranging the knot of his silk cravat whose broad ends were spread out on the facing of his light grey coat. "What a top!" he cried, laughing.

"And you?"

"Myself too! Ah! I say, we're two rare scamps, aren't we?"

And very elderly scamps! Robin was all but seventy, and De Maurèves confessed to being older by a few months. In reality, neither knew exactly how old the other was, and they lied to one another still more than to other people. Their hearts, though, remained still young, their eyes keen, their bodies pretty well shrivelled up, but their figures all the more slender for that, their beards obstinately black, and he who does not grow white willingly forgets that he is growing old. They were as mad, too, after a petticoat as in the lustiest days of their youth, but, alas! they had to content themselves now with moral debaucheries. Of all the satisfactions which they were still permitted to procure for themselves, the most lively, the one which they run after most passionately, was conversing with pretty women; a conversation corrupt to a nicety, but light, and even cynical, in which the suggestiveness was even more tasty than the outspoken expression of it would have been. So, in order to enjoy as often as possible this dainty pleasure, they had had the idea in concert with Kolbach and Fridoret, of organising a weekly lunch, to which were invited, by turns, the less modest of the Parisian actresses. Never had any of the originators missed one of these tempting love-feasts, and an appointment was never urgent, business never important enough, to prevent them coming in the afternoon and re-

galing themselves voluptuously on obscenities uttered by pink lips, and with a provoking expression of face. The only care of these gentlemen was lest the existence of these Monday meetings should be noised abroad. Fancy a paper publishing the account—possibly a most discursive one—of one of their sittings, and giving the names of the persons present! Paris would be amused for a week at the expense of the four old dogs, who all occupied high positions.

Fridoret was a member of the Senate, and, what made it more aggravating, of the Right. Now, under any government, has not the cue of the Opposition always been to set an example of morals, in order to criticise, with more effect, the conduct of its political adversaries? One is at liberty, for all that, to relax one's strictness on coming into office, and ordinarily the monk then becomes a bit of a devil.

The Alsatian, Kolbach, was president of the Conservative Bank, a financial society, very prominent on account of the high figure of its shares, and of whom all the directors defended, at the same time as their own interests, those of the throne and altar.

Robin was a Councillor of State, in spite of his legitimist opinions, which he published ostentatiously, giving people to understand that if the Republic employed him, reactionist as he was, it was solely on account of his brilliant capabilities. "Cardillan," he repeated at every opportunity, "keeps me in my post, in spite of the attacks which a certain section of the press directs against me. 'I know you are a terrible monarchist,' he often says to me, laughingly, 'but you are talented, and, above all, I desire valuable men in the service of the country.' Well and good! behold a great citizen who sacrifices his political opinions to the glory of France!"

As for De Maurèves he was openly republican, although

an old Bonapartist, enriched and decorated by the Emperor. He had amassed five or six millions, by re-selling at a very high price houses or land bought at a very low one, on information received from a well-informed quarter, at the time of Baron Haussmann's building operations in Paris. This first capital, advantageously invested, was augmented every year by the economies of its parsimonious owner, who sagaciously never spent more than a twentieth part of his income. And yet his meanness did not deprive De Maurèves of any of the sweets of Parisian life. He occupied, in the Avenue de l'Opéra, luxurious apartments, whose rent was paid by the lodging allowance which a Marseilles loan society made him to represent them in Paris; thanks to his paper, the "French Standard," his brougham only cost him the twenty francs per month which he allowed his coachman, and the first shirt-makers, tailors, hatters and boot-makers dressed him from head to foot, gratis, in exchange for the puffs which he gave them at the expense of the shareholders.

This practical millionaire, by the way, had had himself appointed managing director of a daily political evening paper, which brought him in, over and above his share in the profits, a salary of twenty thousand francs a year, enabled him to pay his tradesmen in advertisements, and gave him at the same cheap rate the best boxes in the theatres.

Besides, his paper was very prosperous; tedious, dogmatic, pedantic, it was, of all the organs supporting Cardillan, the only one with a large circulation. De Maurèves did not know to whom or to what to attribute this incomprehensible hold on the public; he had, at any rate, the good taste not to ascribe it to himself, having never taken any interest in the "Standard," beyond drawing his own profits from it. To do him justice, no one was more conscious of his own incompetence than himself. The only interest he

took in the paper was a pecuniary one ; when he entered on his duties he dismissed on the spot the clever editors at high salaries, to replace them by cheap mediocrities ; the articles being fortunately anonymous, very few readers had noticed the change.

Robin had gone up to the side-board, which stood in a corner by the side of a piano, to pour himself out some madeira. When he had filled the glasses, he took one and raised it to his lips. "Well, you're not drinking?" said he to De Maurèves, with a smack of the tongue.

"No, not now," replied the director of the "Standard," putting back in its case the pencil which he had been using to black his eyebrows. Robin had noticed this business.

"Now that you have got your head all ready, come and stand close to me at the window," said he ; "don't be alarmed, I'll take care of the paint !"

"I don't understand you," said De Maurèves drily, going and leaning on the balustrade.

"Ah, come !" continued the Councillor of State, after having lighted a cigarette, "could you tell me if Kolbach is Lucie's lover yet ?"

"So they say, and I should be inclined to believe it. Kolbach has always had a mania for keeping Monsieur de Méras's mistresses. That is the sole secret of the sudden opulence of these ladies, whom Hector simply sets up in the world with the Alsatian's money."

"He doesn't make a boast of it though."

"Of course not ; the banker doesn't wish to wound Monsieur de Méras's susceptibility, from fear of quarrelling with him, and of not being able in consequence to get hold of his women. Yes, my dear councillor, that great fool Kolbach is persuaded that he deceives the clever person who lives on him. And he is able to indulge himself with an exquisite feeling of

pride in taking himself for the successful rival of a man reputed to be irresistible."

"And yet he knows well that each of his victories costs him at the very least two or three hundred thousand francs."

"Ah, tell him that, and you will see the effect. Why he maintains stoutly that he never pays women, and nothing flatters him like passing for their lover for his own sake. So in the hope of acquiring among his friends this singular reputation, this astonishing idiot affects to avoid De Méras everywhere, 'in order,' as he says, 'not to have to shake hands with the poor fellow whom he is treating so badly!' For a trifle he would say he lived on them!"

"That's good."

"I'm not making up a word of it," declared De Maurèves.

At that moment, Fridoret, who had walked up to them unheard by reason of the carriages rolling along the street, tapped them both on the shoulder. They turned round almost simultaneously.

"Ah, my good friend!" they cried. And as the waiter took off the senator's overcoat:

"My dear fellow," continued Robin, "we were talking, if not of you, at least of your *alter ego*, the excellent Kolbach. Yes, we were saying that the Conservative Bank is going up and up day by day; it's becoming alarming!"

"Alarming?" repeated Fridoret. "Not for me, at any rate. I sold out a long time ago at thirteen per cent premium."

"What, you! one of the directors, you sell!"

"Like mad, for I'm hard up at present, and I recommend you to follow my example. In three months time the scrip of the Conservative Bank will be worth forty-five francs all told."

"But it will mean ruin for the shareholders!"

"Well; for one person to make money, others must lose

it ! The bank can smash if it likes : we shall have made our pile ! ”

“ But,” continued Robin, “ you risk being compromised in the failure, and then, look out for the law ! ”

“ I ? ”

“ Yes, you ! As a member of the board of directors, aren’t you responsible ? Now Cardillan has declared that he will be down on all senators and deputies, who, for the sake of attendance fees, bolster up shady concerns with their name and position.”

“ Cardillan will have plenty to do without meddling with us. Besides, who says that he doesn’t gamble too ? And then, you know, when a rise is necessary there will be a rise ; the Conservative Bank is opportunist when needful.”

“ Upon my word, on second thoughts, Fridoret, I’m of your opinion ; with Kolbach you have nothing to fear. Ah ! he is a sly dog ! His latest scheme is superb ! The People’s Bank was on the point of stopping ; slap, bang ! he converts it into the Conservative Bank, giving up swindling any longer small people whom charlatans of his stamp have made to disgorge, to turn to the nobility and clergy whose wealth is still intact. He proclaims himself in his prospectuses to be outrageously ultramontane, an excommunicate from heretical finance, preaches a crusade against it, adjures the faithful to crush it, declares that he will refuse all money not absolutely orthodox, and immediately his tills are filled with catholic money. And now the faithful are going to be ‘ done ’ again by their co-religionist Kolbach, who has nothing to fear from justice into the bargain, for the honourable big-wigs of which he has made up his board of directors would prefer, in case of a smash, to shell out to the last louis rather than expose themselves to the disgrace of being punished. Besides this, in sacrificing themselves, they will

draw the compassion of the public on the swindling devotee who has despoiled them."

The floor of the passage creaked beneath hasty steps, and soon appeared through the room door, thrown wide open, the animated faces of Blanche Ivoire, Berthe Pompon, and Rose Lunel.

"Here we are!" they cried, laughingly running up to the three old men whom they kissed one after the other on both cheeks. They took off quickly their mantles and hats, and ran to settle themselves on the knees of their hosts who held out their arms to them.

"You appeared to be talking about serious matters?" said Blanche Ivoire comically, nestling down on Robin's breast.

"Yes, we were talking finance," replied the latter absent-mindedly, fondling with his skinny fingers the young woman's plump hand.

"Then that's a subject which always interests us!" observed Rose Lunel. "Go on!"

"Pooh! you are for nothing but money," said De Maurèves, giving a light tap on Rose's chin.

"You old duck," continued she, "you know well I only love you for yourself."

"My friends," declared Berthe Pompon, "I'm dying with hunger." And, freeing herself from Fridoret's embrace, to spring lightly to the ground, "I'm going to make a start, for my part," she added, seating herself at the table.

"Then we are not going to wait for Lucie?" asked Robin.

"That prude! Ah, I should think not!" exclaimed Blanche Ivoire, seating herself in an empty place.

"So be it, let's begin without her," said De Maurèves. They all seated themselves at once, the three gentlemen having a lady on each side of them. There was silence whilst two waiters handed round the side-dishes.

"Can you believe she's got such luck, that Guépin?" said Berthe suddenly, as she picked a shrimp. "For there's no denying it, she goes down tremendously with the public."

"Not so well as with De Méras," replied De Maurèves.

"Oh, he sucks her in, there's no end to it, it's a sight to see!" pursued Mademoiselle Pompon with an almost imperceptible pout of vexation.

"You are jealous, perchance?" asked Robin.

"Oh! jealous! And yet, I confess I'm fond of De Méras still, although his conduct towards me—"

"Yes, you can't forgive him for living—maritally with the Guépin?" continued the Councillor of State sneeringly.

"Oh, maritally!" protested Berthe. "Wouldn't one think Hector a mug? After all, it's his business. But he's a charming fellow, that's certain. Never mind! Guépin is having a fine time of it, for she has inveigled Kolbach too, a proper man, who writes to a woman on nothing but bank-notes. Very artful, the Alsatian. He has no fear of them keeping his letters!"

Lucie had just come and stood in the doorway.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said she with a graceful inclination of her figure, "accept my respects and my excuses!"

The women muttered a very dry good-day, whilst the men rose to go and meet the "diva."

"How's this, you haven't brought Kolbach?" said De Maurèves.

"He's not here yet? I shall blow him up presently for being so late!"

When she had taken off her hat and gloves, Robin conducted her to the arm-chair which had been kept for her. Without appearing to notice the coolness, the antipathy almost, which the ladies showed towards her, she unfolded her table-napkin, humming, and called out to the manager to have some *pâté de foie gras* sent her,

"Hullo ! Fridoret," she cried to the senator, who for a moment had been casting an ardent look on her, "are you going to leer at me for long like that ?" And devouring an enormous truffle. "Fie ! old libertine !" she murmured.

"For a little girl who still plays with a doll you are pretty cheeky, mademoiselle," interposed Berthe in a forced voice.

"That's better than playing with fiascoes," retorted Lucie, in allusion to the actress's failures.

As Berthe, red with anger, half rose, her nails threatening, De Maurèves interposed.

"Come, my little dears," said he, "don't let's quarrel, and if we have occasion to make it hot for anyone, let it be for those who are absent."

"Yes, and for this reason," hastened to add Rose Lunel, "that I've learnt some fine news about Kolbach ! It would appear that he had a taste of Mazas prison formerly !"

"Impossible !"

"I say yes, in the days when the old scoundrel kept a registry office near the Halles ! They did a bit of everything in this shop. They bought pawn-tickets there at eighty per cent under their value, and if at the end of a month the sum advanced was not repaid, with ten per cent commission, Kolbach redeemed the article pawned, and appropriated it without further ado. A few clerks were found places, but those only who could deposit security, and always with accomplices, who, before bolting, scrupulously shared with the Alsatian the hoard thus obtained. The old rogue went in, too, for selling businesses, after having first come to an understanding with the seller to gild the pill for the buyer. Cook-shops were his forte. The proprietor wishing to retire gave breakfast and dinner, for show, for a few days to all the starving loafers collected in the highways, so that, dazzled by this large connection, some simpleton hastened to strike a bargain, and Kolbach pocketed a splendid bonus

for his trouble. A few dupes made a complaint, and the Alsatian was locked up for two years."

"It's all a pack of lies!" remarked Lucie. "In any case, if he plucked others, the women take good care to pay him back in his own coin, and society is avenged."

"And he who has sinned much, shall have much forgiven him!" concluded Blanche Ivoire.

Kolbach entered, in a black coat and white tie; and, throwing his opera hat on the divan:

"Ah, my darlings," he began, "you mustn't be angry with me. I've just had to swallow a wedding ceremony: a quarter of an hour of sacred music and pious talk! It's a little cousin of mine who was married, and I have family tastes, you know!"

"Well, well," said De Maurèves, "you can extol your domestic virtues later on! At present, sit down to table, Monsieur Alphonse!" He signed to him to take the vacant seat at Lucie's side.

Kolbach immediately leant over the actress to kiss her forehead; she started aside, and managed to avoid the salute.

"Will you be quiet!" said she. "In the first place your wedding story is all nonsense, and you have simply just left some fast woman—libertine!"

"I! Oh! how can you say so, I who love no one in the world but you!" To corroborate his statement he fell on his knees.

"Get up, do!" continued Lucie. "The service is over long ago." And when he was seated. "Some fillet steak à la Lucullus, for this gentleman!" said she to the waiter.

The others had arrived at the sweets—strawberry ice—which the ladies savoured in small mouthfuls, their eyes half closed, like regular little gluttons.

"Was it nice and sweet then?" said Kolbach in a mincing voice, with a childish laugh for Lucie.

"Oh! isn't he ugly! But go on eating, instead of making faces at me!" she replied.

"Goodness! how naughty she is," grunted the Alsatian, looking a fool.

"See what it is to accept money from women," said De Maurèves, "they keep a rod in pickle for you."

Kolbach was charmed, with his little airs of false modesty. However, all the gentlemen begged Lucie to fulfil her promise to sing them the parody on the "Colonel's Song," and the moment had come. But the "diva" raised difficulties; she had not promised seriously, for really the song was too warm. Before the ladies, she would never venture. The latter all protested. Did Mademoiselle Guépin take them for prudes? They were not candidates for the prize of virtue! As Lucie was still unable to make up her mind, the senator and the councillor of state came and took each an arm to drag her to the piano. When they had placed her, almost by force, on the music-stool, she amused herself for an instant with fingering the keys, and suddenly,

"After all," she cried, "I'm only yielding to violence!" And in her sweet and thrilling voice, still with her innocent air, she attacked the first verse.

Ah, yes, it was warm, so warm that Rose Lunel smothered in her handkerchief little cries of outraged modesty, and Berthe Pompon and Blanche Ivoire turned away in order to appear a little ashamed. De Maurèves, Fridoret, and Robin, standing opposite Lucie, enveloped her in a lascivious gaze, their faces flushed, and when an unusually broad expression occurred, they were ready to die away, shaken to the marrow of their bones by a voluptuous shudder. Kolbach was intoxicated by the scent of verbena which arose from the singer's hair; leaning over her, and brushing lightly with his arm her waist or shoulder, he was being deliciously tickled by this touch as soft as a caress. All at

once, with a burst of passion, imprinting a burning kiss on the neck which the young woman, bending over the piano, unconsciously presented to him.

"Ah, siren," he sighed, "when will you be mine?"

"When I can't do better, old monkey!" replied she, continuing at once the interrupted refrain with such fire, that the three actresses bounded, skirt in hand, into the midst of an epileptic "cancan," which in its spasmodic movements gave the enraptured old men glimpses of coloured silk stockings. But soon the dancers, out of breath, went and threw themselves on the divans, their heads thrown back, their arms hanging down, breasts heaving beneath their dresses.

Then, in the midst of the exclamations of fatigue from the exhausted darlings, Kolbach and Robin proposed a game of *écarté*. The councillor had soon lost the five louis which was the usual stake at these games. De Maurèves took his place.

"My poor Kolbach!" exclaimed Blanche Ivoire, "you can make up your mind to lose; that rogue De Maurèves is always good to win his five louis."

And in reality, De Maurèves's luck at this Monday *écarté* was intolerable; thanks to it he enjoyed, without its costing him anything, the society of the ladies, who at the end of the sitting obligingly divided amongst themselves all the money won from the losers, of whom he was never one. On this occasion again at the end of an hour he had a thousand francs in front of him.

"Such luck was never seen," growled Kolbach, whilst the actresses counted the spoils, in anticipation of their early division.

"When you're no longer loved for your own sake you'll win," replied De Maurèves, chaffing, "but that won't be yet awhile, you lucky dog!"

CHAPTER X.

KOLBACH was happy. At last he had triumphed over Lucie's resistance ; he was duping De Méras ! The victory had been slow, difficult, and not inexpensive ; sixty thousand francs down, to take up the bills accepted by the "diva." But there ! that was only an insignificant outlay for him, and one, moreover, which Guépin had only accepted as a loan. "I'm really too much smitten with you," she had declared, "to think of taking anything of you." And, to speak the truth, she had no need to tell him that she adored him ; it was palpable. She had not even concealed it enough, letting it be seen on every occasion that he was her lover, and her lover for his own sake.

"You are imprudent," he repeated, unceasingly ; "it will end by De Méras suspecting. The other day you kissed me almost behind his back. If he had only turned round—"

"Does he frighten you much, then ?" asked Lucie.

"He's my nightmare," he answered with ludicrous terror.

By a refinement of the *blasé* man who has need in love of the excitement of fear, Kolbach persuaded himself that he trembled in the presence of Hector, who, in his libertine imagination, appeared to him to be violent and jealous, capable of killing him if he found him tête-à-tête with Guépin.

Thus, full of this idea that he had embarked on an intrigue in which his life was constantly in danger, he only visited his mistress at night-fall, going up by the back-stairs,

stopping on every step to listen and make certain that no one was following him, searching dark corners from which De Méras might have been watching him, ready to fall upon him like the tiger which waits for its prey in the dusk. During this ascent he passed through such cruel tortures of fear that, after having at last reached the landing, his heart beat so with emotion that he had to lean against the wall. After a rest of two or three minutes he set out again, being obliged to go through five or six rooms before reaching that of his mistress. On the way, he frequently passed servants, who turned away from him from excess of delicacy, so as not to appear to have seen him. The good souls knew all about his relations with the actress, but rather than betray the secret they would have consented to be dismissed. Moreover, in order to be more certain of their discretion, the banker remunerated them liberally. Their silence cost him a hundred francs per head per month, and there were ten of them! When he happened to bewail such munificence he quoted to himself, as a kind of consolation, the well-known proverb, "Nothing costs so much as women who cost nothing."

Before entering Lucie's room, and after much hesitation, as if frightened at his own audacity, he knocked four times on the door; this was the signal agreed upon. If she answered in the low tone which was understood between them, "I'm waiting for you," he turned the handle noiselessly, with the precaution of a burglar, and glided on tiptoe into the room, his finger on his lips to warn her to speak low.

"Hector has gone out," she would murmur; "we have nothing to fear."

"No matter, the least imprudence might ruin us; let us draw the window-curtains and extinguish the lights," he would reply, blowing out the candles in the candelabra and

lowering the lamp, whose uncertain light added the charm of mystery to the meeting.

It was only after having taken these wise precautions that he ventured to go and seat himself at Lucie's side, half lying in a long chair in her dressing-gown of sky-blue plush. His arm around the young woman's waist, he drew her towards him to imprint kisses in her verberna-scented hair. But suddenly, in the midst of a caress, he would shrink from her with ludicrous fear.

"What ails you?" she would ask.

"I thought I heard—" He stammered as if choked with fright. Then, recovering himself gradually: "No," continued he, "it was only a false alarm. But, all the same, supposing he appeared there, suddenly, in front of us! You haven't yet thought of this possibility? For my part, I'm forever thinking of it, as I know him well enough to be certain that he'd stab us both. But there, what would it matter? Is not one look from your lovely eyes more precious than life? And it would be bliss to die with you." Then suddenly, overcome by fresh terror, "I heard steps in the passage this time! Where shall I hide myself?"

With a sign, and containing herself with great difficulty from laughing in his face, she would show him a cupboard in which he could run and conceal himself. In this place of refuge, doubling himself up to make himself smaller, and holding his breath, he imagined a terrible drama. De Méras rushing into the room, revolver or sword in hand, and lifting up all the articles of furniture in the hope of discovering his rival crouching under one of them. Kolbach, during the search, was beside himself with terror, seeing himself stabbed and dragged bleeding to Guépin's feet, who, livid, her hair dishevelled, begged for mercy on her knees—agony at once terrible and delicious!

Lucie was disgusted at this ridiculous comedy, of which

the scenes and dialogue, always the same, were regulated as in a theatre. Sometimes she revolted against her disgraceful complacency which made her submit to the grotesque fancies of a vicious old man; and every day she swore to herself that she would dismiss him, though never having the courage to make up her mind to take this extreme step. What answer, indeed, would she have made to De Méras if he had questioned her on the motives of such a decision? She could not, in any case, have confessed to him that the banker had not been in his conduct towards her "the father" that he supposed, for that foolish Hector did not yet seem to have changed his opinion of the Alsatian! He persisted in regarding him as "the Joseph of finance, leaving in the hands of the women his mantle provided with a well-lined pocket-book." That was true, perhaps, of the Kolbach of former days; at the present time Joseph was no longer such a fool! If he cheerfully left his pocket-book in pretty hands, it was in order to have a right to be exacting, and Lucie knew by experience that the old man would demand, in return for his generosity, an acknowledgment far from platonic. How was it that De Méras, considering the time he had associated with him, did not know Kolbach better? It was so improbable that it would not have taken much to make her suspect their complicity, if she had not believed Hector incapable of such baseness. And besides, to dismiss the Alsatian was more easy to wish than to execute. Who on earth, if not he, would keep up the house on its present footing? Every month swallowed up ten thousand francs, of which three were furnished by Lucie, and the remainder by the banker. Hector contributed nothing to the community at present, cleaned out as he was by his losses at baccarat.

"You're the king of losers," repeated the "diva" to him, "and you persist in playing! It's idiotic!"

"Do you think I do it for amusement?" he replied. "I

do it simply in the hope of winning, by one stroke of luck, a sum large enough to pay off my debts all at once."

He was involved enough, poor fellow ! The house was daily invested by creditors. At first they had contented themselves with sending pressing letters, which their debtor had not seen fit to answer ; afterwards, clerks had been despatched, provided with receipted bills, which they were obliged to take away with them again ; now the masters presented themselves in person, and by the score. For they had come separately at first, and had been obliged to go off again, one after the other, before the porter, who, by his master's orders, inexorably barred their passage ; so, after having taken council together, they had decided to act in masses, and at present it was the porter whom the little troop had forced to beat a retreat.

The laughable tale had got about of these skirmishes between porter and tradesmen, at which loafers often looked on, their heads between the bars of the entrance gate. The unpaid victims even counted on these crowds, and the scandal which they provoked, to bring their insolent customer to a settlement. But De Méras seemed simply to ridicule what the world might say.

" Good gracious, gentlemen," said he, " I am totally indifferent to the opinion which my neighbours choose to form of me. Let them make a laughing-stock of me, let them collect under my windows and insult me, I sha'n't object. Confess now that I am very patient in allowing you to force your way into my house almost every day. And yet I have only to complain to the commissaire of police to rid myself of you. But don't alarm yourselves, I shall certainly not do so, for you amuse me very much. So continue to invade me ; for my part, I will continue not to pay you ! "

The unfortunate wretches left the house with curses ;

for you can fight a porter, but how can you use force against indifference? One of the members of the band proposed an application to Mademoiselle Guépin; the advice appeared sound, and the actress, having been asked, granted an audience.

When the situation had been explained to her, she proposed paying by instalments. The company consented to the arrangement, and two months afterwards, thanks to the money Lucie extracted from Kolbach, De Méras was completely free. The actress informed the young man of this at once. He scolded her, but mildly, for having paid all the rogues.

"I am your debtor now," said he very gravely.

"Yes, but I at least sha'n't come and kick up a row outside," she replied, laughing. After this general liquidation of the past, De Méras recovered all his credit. These same tradesmen who had threatened him with seizure, and would mercilessly have had recourse to it, had he had in the Rue La Boétie or the Rue Taitbout a single table or a single chair to his name, overloaded him, now that they were paid, with their offers to serve him. They followed one another uninterruptedly at the house. The porter, whom they had conciliated by their affability and constant tips, bowed down before them now, and accompanied them into his master's presence. Whenever he affirmed that "master had gone out," they could trust to his word; for it was to his interest that his "partners," as he called them now, should be admitted. As a matter of fact, on each fresh order he received a commission of two per cent, and orders flowed in! One would have said that De Méras had tacitly made up his mind to compensate them for their former discomfiture, and to enrich in a few weeks all his old creditors. He heaped up pictures and bronzes in his apartments, horses in his stables, carriages in his coach-

houses, diamonds in Lucie's cases, and in his strong-box the ruinous sums advanced by money-lenders.

The house had become an inn, where anyone who would eat and slept. The Bécharts, Madame Blaizinot, De Maurèves, Robin, had all their meals there, in company with parasites less regular, guests of passage, and three or four joyous companions without house or home, whom Hector for years past had kept entirely at his own expense or that of his mistresses.

Every fortnight there was a grand reception ; dancing, supping, gambling for formidable stakes, and the winners swept up the money of the master of the house. Lucie sometimes scolded De Méras for his prodigality, but very gently and with a smile. How could she be otherwise than indulgent to him so affectionate, so calm, so attentive, and so easy tempered ? For there was never the slightest disagreement between them. He approved of all that she did, was always of her opinion, and, in his blind confidence in her, left her full and entire liberty. She even reproached him within herself for not being always in her company. Third parties, importunate people, were always coming between them ; even their nights only rarely belonged to them, for there was that horrid club which kept him until five or six in the morning. He only came from time to time to her dressing-room at the theatre, where Kolbach was always at her heels ; they did not even drive together in the Bois, where he professed it was bad form to be seen together in the same carriage. She would have desired a continual, impenetrable, but, alas ! impossible intimacy. Being an actress, she owed almost all her time to the public, like as he, the man about town, was fully taken up by his friends. Possibly these forced separations were, in reality, the secret of their agreement ; love, even the most profound, soon loses its attraction by satiety !

However, De Méras, in spite of retaining the appear-

ance of a happy man, was oppressed by anxiety for the future. His position, brilliant as it was, had nothing stable about it; he was in danger of losing it at a day's notice: it was a life of headlong bohemianism. Lucie, after all, was capable of leaving him and becoming enamoured of some actor. The theatrical world, and he spoke in perfect good faith, is so vain, so infatuated with itself that, outside its own circle, it regards no one as worthy of its love; and discountenances all attachments outside the greenroom. And then, even supposing that he was not supplanted by another, Lucie, as she grew older, might become practical. At twenty, one goes in for sentiment, at thirty, for saving: the old guard is just as practical as the young is disinterested, and within a period more or less remote, Lucie Guépin would prefer being kept to keeping others.

And he asked himself, moreover, whether Lucie would not shortly come to understand that he was no longer of any service to her. The "diva's" success became more certain day by day; thanks to her, the Folies-Parisiennes's shares had increased fivefold in value in one year, and Jarly, from fear that some other director should "rush" him of his star, had engaged her for three seasons at five hundred francs per night. And it was a wise step on the part of the impresario! The rage for Guépin was not born of a caprice of the public; it rested on real talent, and had consequently every chance of enduring. Now, to make certain of retaining a woman representing such a capital, meant a fortune.

Should he marry her? And why not? He would thus be doing a good turn to the little hare-brained thing, who, whilst she was waiting to grow wiser, would indubitably allow herself to be imposed upon by some rogue among her comrades, whilst a husband would look after her interests,

which would be at the same time his own. He must be this husband at no matter what price, and the more so, because she, his mistress, had compromised him in paying his creditors !

“As in the case of young girls who’ve been seduced,” he concluded, laughing, “there’s nothing but marriage will set me up again !”

CHAPTER XI.

ONE night, after having received the evening's receipts from his head check-taker, Jarly took it into his head to make the round of the ladies' dressing-rooms.

"Can I come in?" he asked, on arriving at Lucie's.

"Who is there?" cried she from the inside, without opening the door.

"I, of course!" said Jarly, entering.

"Why didn't you say so? If I shut myself up, it's because of a crowd of bores who come and take up their quarters here whilst I'm dressing. I'm not a prude by any means, and yet it makes me feel shy, on my word of honour! Now, I'm listening to you; but let me go on dressing, for I'm behindhand with my change for the third act.

Naked to the waist, her legs imprisoned in mauve silk tights, at whose two strings, fastened round her loins, she was pulling till she almost broke them, she was throwing all the weight of her body on the lower part of her legs, in order better to stretch the tissue and prevent it from wrinkling at the knees.

"Here goes for an hour's suffocation!" said she, and she took two or three steps across the room to make certain that she was not embarrassed in her movements. "That's the style, and not too soon," she continued, going and seating herself before the toilet-table, for her maid to put on her wig. "Higher than usual, won't you, Sophie? You always put it too much down over my forehead, and they say it hides the eyebrows."

From time to time, an almost imperceptible shudder rippled her snow-white shoulders, as a zephyr breathes upon a calm lake. Whilst holding her head straight in order to facilitate Sophie's work, she cast her eyes on her beautifully firm breasts, looking at them with a smile, or covering them with her arms, with a gesture of coquettish modesty. Seen from behind, with her sloping shoulders separated by the furrow in the back growing gradually deeper towards the back-bone, she resembled the Venus Anadyomene, but overflowing with life.

"You don't seem to be aware that I'm here," said Jarly, after a moment's silence.

"Ah, true, I'd forgotten you! But you don't talk."

"I think none the less," said he, rising to go and kiss his star between the breasts.

"Don't be silly!" said Lucie, without stirring. And as Sophie put the last pins into her hair: "Now," she continued, "my bundle and doublet, quick! By-the-bye, you know, Jarly, if I find these fearful shoes in my room again to-morrow, I won't go on!"

"Because—?"

"Because I've already told your bungler above a hundred times that I haven't got a policeman's feet! Just look at them—like boats!"

"If you begin to complain, I'm off! Besides, if De Méras was to come up—"

"He? He's gone to Bordeaux for the two days!"

"Then you'll have supper with me?"

"And what about Kollbach? Ah, what a fool I am! To-day's Friday, and on that day the good man leaves me to myself, by way of mortification. Besides, when De Méras is away, the Alsatian seems to turn up his nose at me."

"So it's agreed then, a quarter-past twelve at the Maison-

d'Or. Ask for me ; I will engage a private room, for I want to have a serious talk with you."

"Not too serious, is it ? I don't want to be bored !"

At the appointed time, Lucie entered the private room where Jarly awaited her, stretched out on the divan.

"I've ordered oysters, a partridge, and Bordeaux crawfish," said he.

"Bordeaux ! As a remembrance of Hector ? Ah, how nice of you ! We'll eat them to his health." She sat down opposite her director and began craunching radishes.

"It seems quite odd to be supping alone with you ; I can fancy myself the lucky man," declared Jarly.

"I believe you ! And I know plenty who would pay a high price to be in your place !"

"Possibly so, but you don't know many who entertain towards you the same feeling as I," he answered, in a serious voice, and casting a tender and respectful look on her.

"Ha ! ha ! what a way you said that in !" she cried, bursting out laughing at the sight of the impresario's comically sanctimonious face.

All at once, she suddenly remembered the day when, after the performance, Jarly had called her into his room to tell her that she was to take Anna Duc's part. She well recollected that Blaizinot was walking up and down in the ante-room with the property man, and that she heard their conversation through the door, whilst Jarly, profiting by the joy and surprise which the news of her unexpected *début* in an important part had caused her, threw her on the sofa, after only a few words of gallantry. She had yielded, partly from pride at being for an instant the mistress of her director, and principally from fear that Jarly, irritated by a refusal, might change his mind.

"You're going to swear you loved me, perhaps ?" said she, after a moment.

"I don't know whether I loved you then ; but I know that now I adore you."

"Shut up ! do, you humbug !"

"You don't believe me, then ?"

"How can you expect it ? These returns to the charge are always so comical," said she, looking down at her glass.

"At any rate, you're not going to tell me, I imagine, that you are fond of that De Méras still ?"

"My dear fellow, I had a fancy for him—a real one !"

"Good ; but that's more than six months ago, and confess that, by now, your fancy has slightly cooled."

"H'm, it's certainly not quite what it was, but I can't forget, however, that he made my position."

"In bringing you Kolbach ? Well, they are astonishing !" And he began to curse those infernal women, who could not make up their minds to have done with that idiot, Hector. How did he manage to bewitch them all ? It was like that Berthe Pompon ! De Méras had reduced her, after seizure, to a mattress and a pair of sheets, and she sang his praises everywhere ! And why ? Because, after having been sacked, she had met the Duke de Sé, who had paid all her debts and bought back the house in the Avenue d'Eylau to present it to her. Ah ! no ; Jarly had really imagined something better than De Méras for Lucie ! She reminded him that it was he himself who had almost forced him upon her, and he hastened to reply immediately that he had only looked upon this connection as a passing one. As he talked, he filled up Lucie's glass frequently with champagne, which she, excited by the discussion, drank copiously.

She rose, and everything about her seemed to dance. "Luckily my brougham is below !" she stammered. "Just look if Jean is there still !"

Jarly opened the window, and saw in the Rue Laffitte the coachman sitting upright on the box, reins and whip in hand,

whilst the horse, his legs stretched out, champed his bit with a regular tossing of his head. Jarly led Lucie back to the sofa, and sat down at her side.

The young woman had recovered a little by the contact with the fresh air, but in the state of half-intoxication which still held possession of her, a refrain kept running in her head,

“Dites lui z’y putôt
Que je suit à Bordeaux,
Prisonnier des Anglais,
Qu’ell’n’ me r’verra jamais !”

And both laughed as they thought of De Méras. Suddenly their lips met. Jarly rose, pushed the inside bolt of the room door and came back to Lucie’s side. A quarter of an hour afterwards, when they found themselves sitting opposite one another again, sipping Kûmel as they smoked their cigarettes, Lucie caught herself still humming beneath her breath :

“Dites lui z’y putôt,
Que je suit à Bordeaux.”

“Haven’t you done piping your Bordeaux ?” said Jarly, impatiently.

“It’s not my fault, old boy, it comes of itself !”

“Try to listen to me for an instant.”

“Ah ! this is the solemn moment,” said she chaffingly.

“You ought to marry.”

“That’s a fine idea, that is !”

“Certainly it’s an idea. You’re already successful ; marriage will bring you, in addition, the good opinion of the world, without reckoning, my dear, what you might become in the hands of an intelligent husband !”

“And this husband,” asked Lucie, “would be doubtless yourself ?”

“Why not ? A man in the business, who would know

how to make the most of you ! And then you've proved to me that I'm not unpleasing to you ! It will be better, at any rate, than letting yourself be imposed upon by one of your comrades ! ”

“ Oh, it's not only our comrades who impose on us, take my word for it.”

“ That's one for De Méras ? ”

“ Oh, no—not exactly.” And she repeated once more mechanically,

“ *Que je suit à Bordeaux.* ”

“ I say, you're sickening ! ”

“ No,” replied she, interrupting herself suddenly to seize Jarly's hands, “ I'm serious, on the contrary, very serious. You want to marry me, don't you ? Well, good gracious ! there's nothing impossible in that. I'll speak to De Méras about it, and to Kolbach too. He's a good adviser, Kolbach ! Ah ! if Blaizinot was here he'd give me his advice, he would, and sincerely ! ”

She rose and reeled towards the peg where her mantle was hanging.

“ Supposing I ring ? It's half past three. One must be respectable when one's going to be married,” said Jarly, suiting the action to the word.

“ Have you money to pay the bill ? ” asked she. “ If not, here's my purse ; there should be seven or eight louis in it.”

“ Are you mad ? ” replied Jarly.

“ Oh, it doesn't matter with me, you know. We're friends, aren't we ? I pay, you pay, turn and turn about.”

Jarly took a hundred-franc note from his pocket-book to pay the bill, and escorted Lucie to her carriage.

“ I haven't been too long, old man ? ” said she to the coachman, her foot on the step. “ You can bear witness to your master.

“ *Dites lui z'y putôt.* ”

“ Ah ! fact is, I'm going to be married. No more follies, little Jean ! ”

That night she slept dressed, on one of the sofas in the reddish-brown room. Jarly returned home from there on foot, his mind delightfully soothed by the prospect of the approaching marriage. He did not love Lucie and never had loved her. This little woman, with her pale face, her delicate limbs and rather frail though beautifully modelled body, only half satisfied his taste for brilliant carnations and solid flesh. But Lucie cost him five hundred francs a day, and although she enabled him to realise splendid profits, these five hundred francs were drawn every day from his purse. He would no longer have to pay out this sum if he married her. Hitherto, he had fleeced his actresses by forfeits ; he was about to fleece them by marriage. Guépin his wife, she would not only no longer be a charge on the budget of the theatre, but she could not be carried off at the expiration of her engagement, since all the agreements she signed would have to bear her husband's signature. It was whilst full of this project and of the great advantages which he must derive from it that he had knocked at Lucie's dressing-room door. On taking leave of him outside the restaurant, the “ diva ” had promised him an early answer, and this answer he was still awaiting. But, in the meantime, also, De Méras had returned from Bordeaux, and Lucie had informed him of Jarly's intentions.

Hector had at once seen through the director's scheme, and exposed it. Really, Lucie must be uncommonly simple not to have seen immediately that Jarly had no other object than that of imposing on her.

Ah ! the greedy fellow ! Did she not then bring him in enough as an actress, for him to be thinking of profiting by her salary by marrying her ? Ah ! a nice match he was proposing to her ! From the time when he was a music-

hall tenor, Jarly, in order to swell his scanty salary, had had recourse to certain devices of which the majority would have brought him within the pale of the law, and this shady past was notorious ! Besides, he was hardly more attractive physically than morally. Stumpy, fat, dissipated-looking, he was ugly enough to disgust a portionless girl, and he had too little wit to redeem the grotesqueness of his person. And it was at the time when the papers were daily announcing the marriage of actresses with members of the nobility or princes of finance that Lucie would be stupid enough to make such a match. The "diva," too easily convinced to resist very long, declared that she would the more readily renounce the idea of becoming Madame Jarly that she had never seriously wished it.

A few days afterwards, De Méras, who checkmated the plans of others the better to hatch his own, on entering Lucie's house passed Kolbach who was coming out.

"I'm always running into that old man," he murmured sullenly, throwing himself on one of the little quilted arm-chairs in his mistress's room. And he added bitterly : "It disgusts me fearfully !"

"Are you joking ?"

"No, I swear not ! I experience at the sight of that man, I know not what feeling of pain and anger."

On serious occasions Hector knew how to give his voice a certain moving ring which had the best of effects on hearts that were easily impressed. Lucie did not escape its influence.

"Can you be jealous ?" said she.

"Well—yes."

"And jealous of Kolbach ?"

"Of Kolbach."

"Certainly men are incomprehensible. A few months ago, it was you who introduced the Alsatian to me as the best of fathers, and now you are begging me to dismiss him !"

“ Ah ! don’t let us try and deceive ourselves any longer,” replied Hector ; “ the banker has been your lover. I suffered about it, without saying anything to you, because I felt I was almost as guilty as you. Yes, at one time when I had but a sensual caprice for you, and when I saw you worried about money, I advised you to accept Kolbach’s offers, feeling myself unable to get you out of the difficulty. I wished you to be happy, and I sacrificed myself ; now I shall never have strength enough for such self-denial. With me, love has attained a violence which I could never have suspected ; I feel determined to keep you altogether without anyone else having a share, for all that is of you is too dear to me to permit anyone soever to touch it in future. Besides, is it not my right to be thus exacting ? Have you not acquired now, to a great extent by your talent, but also a little by my influence, a splendid position ? You are no longer in debt, and you earn two hundred thousand francs a year ; could you have aspired to more, the day I watched you from the wings and foretold your success ? And then, during our intimacy I have studied your character and learnt to esteem you ! There are treasures of delicacy in you, and I know how much it must have cost you to lend yourself to according—favours to Kolbach which must have had the appearance of a bargain.”

“ Oh ! that’s true ! ” cried Lucie.

“ Well then, it’s settled, you will send him off ? ”

“ To-morrow ! ”

The next morning, whilst De Méras was taking his daily ride in the Bois, Kolbach presented himself in the Rue La Boétie.

“ Madame has gone out,” said Sophie to him.

“ I’ll wait for her.”

“ It’s needless, sir ; madame will only come in with Monsieur de Méras.”

"So much the better! I shall have the pleasure of seeing them both," said the Alsatian, sneering.

"Good gracious! sir, I don't know how to tell you—but madame—told me to tell you that she would receive you no more."

"Never?"

"Never!"

"She's quarrelling with her banker now! Things must be looking up," said Kolbach to himself, as he went down the steps.

The idea struck him to look up at the first floor windows, and he saw at once, in that of Lucie's room, a curtain which was just falling down.

"She's there laughing at me," he thought; "I was certain of it!" And he added as he got into his brougham. "Upon my word, I'll go back to Berthe Pompon. I'll wait there till De Méras comes to fetch me, and that won't be long!"

Lucie experienced a real feeling of self-satisfaction. It was nice, it was comforting to discover that she was better than she had thought; and Hector's recriminations and jealousy, which she believed to be sincere, testified to a flattering return of passion on the part of her lover. Certainly, he was quite right! She had no longer the right to sell herself, now that she was celebrated and well off, and the only other amendment possible for her—who could no longer be lured by the hope of concluding a lawful union—was that of having but one lover. So a few days afterwards, when De Méras, dining alone with her, started the question of marriage, he found her quite prepared.

"You would marry me, you, my darling?" she cried, getting up to kiss him across the table.

"What is there extraordinary in that? Haven't I always been above silly prejudices. I know how to recognize merit and virtue, wherever they are to be found, and you gave me,

in breaking with Kolbach, such a proof of love, that in future I'm as sure of you as of myself."

"And you are not mistaken—but—your family—above all, your uncle—what will they say and then, your sister?"

"Am I not of age, and consequently free to do as I please?"

"Your friends will think it strange perhaps—"

"My friends will take good care not to offer me the slightest reproach; they all know too well that I should not stand it! But you seem to be seeking reasons to dissuade me! Is my proposal displeasing to you?"

"Ah! my darling, it charms me, it enchants me, but I expected it so little—I am trying to persuade myself that it's all true, and pinching myself to make certain that I'm not asleep, and that it isn't a dream!"

"No, you are wide awake, and I too. I'm holding out my hands to you for you to place yours in them, and saying: 'Will you let them remain there all your life?' My question is loyal and open; answer it in the same spirit, Yes or No."

"In that case, it is yes, yes, with all my heart!" she replied, throwing herself on Hector's neck. And at night she went to sleep murmuring in her lace pillow: "Madame de Méras! —That's something like a name!"

CHAPTER XII.

HECTOR, having made up his mind not to allow his mistress's enthusiasm to cool, authorised her to announce their marriage. So the first words she said on entering the green-room in the evening were, "I'm going to be spliced, d'you know, my friends!"

"You!" cried all the women. "And to whom?"

"To my little Hector."

"To De Méras! Not bad taste, youngster!"

"You can't complain of having been long settling your affair," observed Merval.

"De Méras is a good enough affair for me," said she, rather vexed at the expression used by the tenor. "Hector and I are marrying because we love one another, and our respective fortunes are a matter of perfect indifference to us."

"Perhaps yours is not so much a matter of indifference to him as all that," replied Bettina, who was only too happy to throw cold water on the "diva's" too exuberant joy by an ill-natured remark.

"In that case, he could have continued to be my lover!" replied Lucie, naively. "And you know, my dear, I wouldn't advise you to go and repeat your remark to him!"

"Oh, what would it matter if I did? I'm a woman, and I'm not afraid of him!"

Five minutes afterwards Jarly heard the news. He knit his brows.

"Well, I'm done!" he murmured. "Well played, De Méras! No matter! I'm not sorry for having profited by his journey to Bordeaux!" And he smiled with satisfaction at the remembrance of his tête-à-tête with Lucie at the Maison-d'Or.

"After all," he concluded, by way of full consolation, "perhaps it's better it should be he than I. She's a frivolous creature who'll make a fool of him."

The next day the well-informed papers announced the coming marriage in their theatrical column, with remarks for the most part sympathetic. Some praised Lucie's good conduct, which was finding the reward of virtue in the brilliant match she was about to make; others congratulated Hector de Méras on his choice. He could not lay his fortune, his carriages and his house at the feet of a more adulated and at the same time a more estimable charmer than the celebrated "diva" of the Folies-Parisiennes. Some were certainly sarcastic. A paragraph writer of the "Figaro," amongst others, stated that, rightly or wrongly, the public did not appear to be quite satisfied of the immaculate purity of all the actresses, who, since a short time back, had besieged the altars of the capital on the arms of simpletons of husbands. So he advised these young ladies to put on for the nuptial benediction the costume of one of the brides in the parts which had been acted by them.

"No one, then," said he, "will make a joke of your orange blossoms, which will be no longer the emblem of virginity, but simply a theatrical detail." And as the epilogue of his tale, the journalist related, with fictitious names, the history of the loves of Lucie Guépin and Hector de Méras, stating that the bride would be accompanied at the mayor's office and the church by her two favourite lovers, the actor B. and the banker K.—in other words, Blaizinet and Kolbach, who at the solemn moment

would initiate her by word of mouth into the hymeneal mysteries.

By the agency of some good anonymous soul, the article, all framed in blue pencil, reached De Méras, who at first thought of unmasking, and afterwards calling out the writer. But on reflection, he very soon saw that such a challenge would be an act of signal folly, and threw the paper on the fire, satisfied that if any one had ventured to send it him by post, no one, at least, would dare to allude to it in his presence.

A few days before the date fixed for the ceremony, Hector and Lucie had to settle on their witnesses. As it had been agreed that everything should take place privately, without any show, and that the letters formally announcing the marriage should not be sent until afterwards, De Méras did not dream for an instant of applying to his friends at the club; he was equally far from thinking of his family, whom he had not even informed of his intention, certain of meeting an opposition which he did not care to give himself the trouble to combat. And, as a matter of fact, he had to go through two or three very violent scenes with his uncle Béraudy, scenes, be it understood, to which he attached no importance.

He had, accordingly, made up his mind to claim the assistance of Robert Mimès and Anatole Pipert, who would be only too happy to be able to oblige the future husband of her on whom they had built all their hopes of authors to be. As for Lucie, she had at once come to an agreement with her friend's father, with Béchart, who was decorated, was a man of weight, and who would constitute in himself on her behalf a whole respectable family. It was not for the sake of the public, which was quite put on one side, that she was anxious to secure the second clerk, but for that of the mayor and his clerks, the priest and his

assistants, in whose eyes she was anxious to appear as patronized by someone of repute. The second witness was less easy to find; at last, after much hesitation, she decided on Jarly.

Her director still inspired her with some of that respectful submission which she had towards him when she was only a chorus-singer, and she did not doubt that he would have almost as much weight with the clergy and mayor as he had with her. Unfortunately, she had not seen Jarly since the night at the *Maison-d'Or*, and she had every reason for supposing that he had some ill-feeling towards her. Nevertheless she resolutely presented herself before him one afternoon.

"You!" he cried, when he saw her enter smiling. "The deuce, you're a rare bird!"

"You're not angry with me?"

"On what account?"

"Because I'm going to marry De Méras."

"Do you take me for a fool, then?"

"I took you to be in love."

"I certainly am, and I didn't need to marry you to prove it."

"Hush!—If any one were to hear you!—No, but I assure you, people in the same line should never see too much of one another. I'm certain that if we had had the folly to marry we should have led a devil of a life!"

"That's just what I said to myself!"

"Then I can ask you to do me a service? You won't refuse?"

"Only if it's an impossible one."

"Be my witness before the mayor; I've already got Béchart."

"Agreed!"

"And you promise me to be polite to De Méras."

"I say, it seems to me that it isn't for me to bear him any ill-will."

She kissed him for his trouble.

As he had foreseen, De Méras met with, no less after than before the announcement of his marriage, the most flattering reception at the Mirlitons ; all the men vied with one another in praising his determination. Dorneval especially extolled Lucie's good qualities, maintaining that that lucky rogue Hector was preparing a life of Paradise for himself in marrying such a woman. As for De Mezor, he declared that the young people were wrong in not organizing an imposing ceremonial. Lucie was much loved, Hector much cultivated by society, and all Paris would have taken a holiday to be present at a choral service, in which the best artistes from the Opera and the Opera-Comique would willingly have taken a part. As for the Marquis of Séphane, he was quite thunderstruck by the remarks on Lucie, so different according as Hector was or was not present. Each time, De Mezor gave him the most curious explanations of these sudden changes.

"My dear marquis," he would conclude by saying from time to time, "when you've been ten years in Paris, you will have got rid of this—tropic simplicity."

One only of De Méras's friends had criticized his matrimonial intentions. This was Armand Lobel.

"There's no truth, is there, in this report?" he said to Hector one evening in the lobby of the Opera.

"What report?"

"This marriage—"

"Certainly there is—nothing could be more accurate!"

"Really? Lucie and you?"

"What is there extraordinary in that?"

"Oh! upon my word, nothing, only, with your name, perhaps you might have—"

"In questions of affection, my dear Armand—"

"By all means, but your family—Monsieur Béraudy, for instance—cannot look on this match with much pleasure?"

"Certainly not! Myuncle's ideas are so behind the times!"

"And then, with a fortune like you possess, it seems to me—"

"Well, my fortune," replied De Méras, rather embarrassed, "my fortune makes no difference. In the first place, admitting that it is as large as people choose to make it, I think, for my part, that the richer a man is, the more contempt he ought to have for prejudices, especially when it is a question of a woman to whom one is going to attach one's self for life."

"You are right, perhaps," said Armand in a tone which showed he was not convinced.

De Méras plainly perceived the kind of awkwardness which Lobel felt in speaking his mind to the brother of the girl he loved. His principle was never to beat about the bush, so he anticipated the questions which Armand could not make up his mind to put to him.

"You have still some objection to make? Speak frankly, my dear friend," said he.

"Well, you will excuse me," replied Lobel, "but there has been so much talk about the supposed intimacy of Kolbach with Mademoiselle Guépin."

"Kolbach!" cried De Méras, bursting out laughing. "Ah, I was expecting that. What! you, a serious fellow, did you believe for an instant that Kolbach—? But it's pure calumny, and you can refer to the man most interested in order to know the truth on the point. Ah, there! can't you find the key to the enigma? That old maniac has only one passion in the world, next to business—actresses, and he can only be their friend."

"But still—"

"My dear fellow, don't insist, it would be insulting Lucie!"

"I beg your pardon, it was out of friendship."

"That's why I did not take it otherwise," said De Méras in a tone which cut short further discussion.

"After all, the world is so wicked," said Lobel to himself as he walked away. "For if Hector is not sincere, he is the worst of wretches, and nothing justifies such an opinion of him."

In accordance with their mutual resolution, De Méras and Lucie issued no invitations for the ceremony. The only guests were Jarly and Béchart, Lucie's two witnesses; Anatole Pipert and Robert Minès, Hector's; Douglis the comedian, Mortal the young tenor and his dear Bettina, Dorneval, Madame and Mademoiselle Béchart, Sophie, and lastly Pipart, the door-keeper of the theatre—in all, twelve persons. Then it had been decided that the wedding should not take place in Paris, at Saint-Philippe du Roule, Lucie's parish, but at Colombes, where the actress had purposely taken a small property.

The first thing in the morning, the couple awoke lying side by side in the same bed, the great bed with light blue curtains in Lucie's room. They had ordered Sophie to come and knock at their door early, so as to give them plenty of time to get ready without being too much hurried, and it was hardly light when with one movement they threw off the clothes to get up.

Lucie was really frightened by this formidable word marriage which, since her infancy, had always called up in her mind a mixture of clashing bells, a quiet and select crowd, a mysterious celestial intervention. She almost felt inclined to push Hector away when he ran after her to kiss her on her neck, beneath her soft hair, with all the ardour of a lover twenty years old who has contrived a first meeting.

"Have done!" said she, impatiently. "With all your folly I shall never be ready!"

It was an important question for her, her wedding toilet. She had insisted on a white dress, for she would not have believed herself really married in a coloured one, and she had ordered it without telling Hector, who, to tell the truth, would have approved unreservedly. In order to manufacture again for herself a virginity—in appearance at least—and, as lawful wife, no longer to wear linen polluted by the mistress, she had made herself a present of a new trousseau, leaving to Sophie all the relics of past misconduct. She had only kept a few dresses; but chemises, stockings and corsets, they were too close to the skin and must be replaced.

Sophie, who, the day before, had laid out in the room all that constitutes a bride's toilet, from the veil to the white satin slippers, took up one by one respectfully each of the articles of the immaculate clothing, to aid mademoiselle to put them on.

"Ha, that smells nice!" said Hector, taking long sniffs at the exquisite perfume which the disturbed linen gave out. And he approached his betrothed to kiss her on the shoulder at the edge of the chemise fringed with Valenciennes.

"Oh, these men! they believe in nothing!" cried she, scandalised.

"Yes, they do," said Hector, carelessly. "on the contrary, I believe firmly in the white favours threaded through the delicate web of this lace, in the opal silk stockings and the milky satin shoes! Nothing invites love like this profusion of white on white, especially when the breast is enamelled like yours, and the hair, black as jet, like that which encircles your forehead!"

"You're mad to day!"

"Mad with joy!"

When the stays were laced, and he saw reflected in

the great cheval-glass his mistress's elegant waist, more slender than usual, he ran to clasp it with his fingers; then, as Sophie had left the room, he suddenly placed his lips on Lucie's.

"Sir, you're really most indelicate!" said she, recoiling, and blushing scarlet.

"Ah, you don't say that always!"

"But, once more, to-day, if it was only on account of the servants, it seems to me you might be careful."

Hector laughed. Well, that was good! As if the servants had not had their own opinions long enough ago.

"At any rate, you might be quiet out of deference to me, your betrothed," returned Lucie. "You know that I'm superstitious, and that I hate joking about religious matters."

"So be it, I'll leave you; you can call me when Sophie has fastened your dress."

"He's gone at last, and we can have peace," cried Lucie, on hearing the room door shut after Hector.

"Not to mention that madame is right. It's more proper that master should not be in the room during madame's toilet," hastened to add Sophie, who, having never been in service but with actresses or kept women—had on that account more respect for virtuous women, or those who were on the point of becoming so—and maintained that they should be respected.

She had even had a scene with the footman and coachman, who were dying with laughter in the entrance hall, as they talked about madame being married in a white satin dress and orange-blossoms.

"If I'd been her," said Jean, "I'd have put a busby on my head as a kind of crown! That would just have suited the occasion!"

"You're very funny, master Jean," Sophie had cried,

“but I should advise you, if you’re so sceptical, not to go often rummaging under brides’ dresses!”

“Just so, he’d get sold too often!” retorted the coachman who was rather fond of broad jokes. “He’d almost always find a lath or a board!”

“That’s not the case with mademoiselle!” replied Sophie, who that morning affected to call her mistress no longer madame. “I guarantee that the bridegroom won’t be sold as you say.”

“Hang it! He ought to know more about it than you!” sneered Jean, impertinently.

“Ah! it’s lucky for you I’m busy with mademoiselle this morning, for you’d make me disgrace myself!” returned Sophie, going off.

Hector re-entered Lucie’s room just as she was finishing the hooking of her dress, a very high one, which showed off gracefully the delicious outline of the breast. Her hair had been gathered together by Sophie in a low chignon, which, just touching the nape of her neck, gave the bride the innocent air of a girl of eighteen, made more striking by the fresh colour with which the morning’s emotions had mantled her cheeks. Two fine pearls, white and dainty, clinging to the lobes of her ears, replaced the two large diamond solitaires, which, as a rule, excited the envy of so many little companions, and two white, plump, baby hands, bare of rings, peeped from the long narrow sleeves of her dress. She had an adorable air of youth and purity, and when she went to meet Hector, singing with her modest look,

“Allons monsieur, qu’en dites-vous,
La mariée est elle belle?”

the young man felt almost timid and contented himself this time with simply kissing her forehead. She glanced at the clock.

"A quarter past ten ! Hector, put on my orange-blossom, quick !"

"Certainly."

"By-the-bye, no, you mustn't touch it," said she, thrusting away her lover bashfully.

"Ah ! I'm at one with you there ; I've a right to take it off, but that of putting it on doesn't belong to me."

When they went downstairs, Jean was seated on the box, in the stiff and solemn attitude belonging to the coachmen of the upper ten.

A few of the neighbouring tradesmen, having been informed by the servants of the time of the bride's departure, had formed a group in the Rue La Boétie, in front of the railings of the house ; but Jean had received strict orders. He urged his horse into a fast trot on emerging from the court-yard, and, as the windows were raised, all these inquisitive folks had their labour for their pains. They were lucky if they caught a glimpse, in the depths of the brougham, of a confusion of white stuff, by the side of a black mass, De Méras's coat. It was a quarter-past eleven when the carriage stopped in front of the little house at Colombes, where the guests, who had come by the same train, were waiting, grouped around Jarly and Béchart.

"She's charming, the little bride," they all murmured, surrounding Lucie, who received their praise with a school-girl's modesty, and affected to talk in low tones, and to converse for choice with Irma Béchart, the only girl in the company.

Bettina, who forgot her comrade's jealousy in the importance of the ceremony—which she hoped before long to celebrate on her own account with Mertal—had constituted herself the bride's elder sister, plying her with advice on the attitude she was to take up in the presence of the mayor, and, above all, of his reverence, the priest. Béchart had

monopolized Jarly, and was giving him as official the news of his nomination to a chief clerkship, and already offering him his services in case the Folies-Parisiennes should have any difficulty with the authorities of the Beaux-Arts. As for Madame Béchart, she had had to take Dorneval's arm, who was reproaching her, though half-heartedly, with having sacrificed him for another.

Mertal and Douçais were chatting apart about a piece in rehearsal. Sophie was taking care that mademoiselle's dress did not get soiled or rumpled. As for old Pipart, the door-keeper at the Folies-Parisiennes, he had tears in his eyes at seeing the star of his theatre doing so well for herself.

"Ah, mademoiselle, what a pity," he had said to Lucie; "what a pity Monsieur Blaizinot isn't here. He would be so happy! He who loved you so much!"

And, to conclude, Anatole Pipert and Robert Mimès were composing on a corner of the table, one the words, the other the music of a nuptial song which Mertal was to sing at the breakfast after the service.

The company set out towards the mayor's office, which was situated in the Grande Rue, and to which the news of the marriage of the celebrated Parisian "diva" had attracted some few curious people, peasants, shop-keepers, day-labourers from the suburbs, who were anxious to see an actress close to for once in their lives.

It was beneath the fixed gaze of this company that Lucie and Hector answered the sacramental "Yes" to the question of the municipal official. The latter abstained from making any set speech; he contented himself, as soon as the legal formalities were concluded, with addressing himself airily to Lucie.

"Madame," said he, "the marriage you have just contracted is rather more serious than that with which the

"Beautiful Andalusian" terminates every evening, for it will only finish with life, which, after all, is only a play."

"Oh, I'll endeavour to play the bride's part to the best of my ability," replied the actress, laughing.

They entered the church through a lane of poor people, into whose hands Lucie emptied the contents of her purse. She was on Béchart's arm, who was filling the part of father or uncle, whilst De Méras escorted Juliette, who found that the functions of a mother-in-law made her look unreasonably old. Then came Bettina with Jarly, Anatole Pipert with Irma, and the other gentlemen followed in no particular order.

Hector and Lucie took up their position at the two velvet-covered fall-stools which had been placed for them in the chancel in front of their seats, whose brocaded covering showed on the back and arms the brownish stains of grease and use. Lucie was really charming, as she knelt with her eyes on her prayer-book, and this pious posture showed off, beneath the tissue of her veil, the elegance of her figure. In her white dress she looked like a devotional maiden, a celestial apparition on which the dim light of the church bestowed a supernatural charm. Jarly smiled diabolically as he looked at her. He called to mind Blaizinet, Kolbach, and himself, not to mention the others, and, in spite of himself, he thought of the Lucie of the private room at the Maison-d'Or, murmuring that refrain which he in his turn began to hum :

"Dites lui z'y putôt,
Que je suit à Bordeaux."

Bettina, at his side, was shedding tears in a delicious lace handkerchief; she knew not why, but these solemnities always made her cry.

Béchart, his arms crossed, was very dignified, whilst his daughter, seated betwixt Anatole Pipert and Robert Mimès,

was dying to burst out laughing, on seeing the fat beadle, who was sleeping as he stood, catch hold of his halberd to save himself from falling.

Madame Béchart was praying fervently, possibly that heaven would bring back to her her inconstant Lobel.

The priest, who, the day before, had received from Lucie a pyx for his church, had prepared a long exhortation for the married couple. He had hoped to pronounce before a numerous company his laboriously-composed piece of rhetoric. Accordingly he was disagreeably surprised when, on turning round to Lucie and Hector, he perceived in the almost empty nave but a dozen of the faithful. Nevertheless, he commenced his oration. After having congratulated the actress on her hitherto exemplary life, he loaded De Méras with eulogies. The good young man who, in order to possess the woman he loved, and whom he wished to make his companion before God and man, had not hesitated first to have recourse to a religious marriage, that great mainstay of modern nations.

"I am pleased," added he, "that young men should silence prejudice and elevate a whole class which is unjustly looked down upon by choosing a wife from amongst them. Nothing is so sublime as the spectacle of virtue, preserved intact in the midst of the temptations of the world, mating in defiance of what that same world may say!" And the orator continued thus, muddling himself through several pages, inventing at every line some new quality with which to adorn the givers of the pyx.

If Sophie had not held him back, Pipart, in his enthusiasm, would have ascended to the altar to thank the priest for his panegyric on actresses in general and Lucie in particular.

In the evening, at seven, after a plentiful repast, all the wedding party repaired to the theatre for the evening performance. When Lucie appeared on the stage, in her cos-

tume of a Spanish bride, with orange-blossoms in her hair, that portion of the audience who knew about the ceremony of the morning burst into applause.

"You see, my darling," cooed Bettina in Merial's ear, at the sound of the salvoes of bravos, "the public has a weakness for married actresses! You'll marry me soon, won't you, that I may have my ovation too?"

CHAPTER XIII.

HECTOR had promised Lobel to take him often to his uncle Béraudy's ; but, too much absorbed in his own affairs, and more and more estranged from his family by his new life, he had not kept his word.

Accordingly, Armand, tired of waiting and of only seeing Mademoiselle de Méras in the whirl of Parisian balls, had decided to present himself again in the Rue de l'Arcade. One day, he found the excellent old man seated at his desk, working at a treatise on philosophy, for which he had a mad passion. Monsieur Béraudy held out his hand to the young man, and made him seat himself opposite him, in front of the window. It was a principle of his, before forming his judgment on a man, to place him in the full light and to scan well his face, having, from his long experience of life, acquired the certainty that the good qualities or failings of an individual are reflected always more or less faithfully in his countenance. He began by putting a few questions to Armand, trifling ones, apparently, but which, in reality, had a serious import. Armand answered them doubtless to the great satisfaction of the old man, and his eyes inspired him with absolute confidence, for, after this summary interrogatory, Monsieur Béraudy himself broached the subject of the young man's hopes.

"Do you know, sir," said he, half serious, half joking. "that at the present moment I ought to have you turned out of the house by my servants as a dangerous thief?"

"What do you mean, sir?" murmured Armand, quite taken aback on hearing this rough remark, which contrasted so strangely with the good nature of his questioner.

"Certainly!" replied the latter. "Did you not come to my house, armed from head to foot, to snatch from me my dearest treasure? And if you did not burst my door, it was because I opened it willingly."

"You are joking, sir," hazarded the lover.

"Joking! It's all very well for you to talk! But I should like you to be in my place, having reared from the age of eighteen months a being like she is; having seen her developing year by year, day by day, almost; having felt her arms when a baby, and afterwards as a young girl, encircle your neck; having witnessed that astonishing transformation of an infant's mind into that of a woman. And all this in order that one day someone more or less unknown, more or less sympathetic, should come and say to you: 'I beg pardon, my dear sir, this infant whom you have nourished body and soul, this little girl whom you have changed into a woman, eager for every possible affection and devotion, this ignorant creature, who, thanks to you, has been taught to love, don't imagine that she is for you. You are only her uncle, a good sort of uncle, possibly, but now that she is grown up, she no longer belongs to you, for I am here, I, the young man who loves her, and I am going to take her away from you, and if I marry her, as I hope to do, it is to me in future that she will owe her mind, her smiles, her kisses, and many other things too!' And you think I can give him a welcome?"

"Then, sir, you reject me without even hearing me?" stammered Armand, looking crestfallen.

"Why, no, child that you are, I do not reject you, because I have not the right, or rather, the courage; because if I forbade you my house, I should see tears in those beloved eyes

immediately, and through those tears a swelling heart, and God forbid that I should provoke them in a being whom I love above everything in the world. But, at least, do not be astonished that my poor heart is sore, and that it asks for some respite—the time to accustom myself to thought and solitude—and to convince myself thoroughly that the blow will not kill me. And then, again, I must make inquiries as to yourself; that is my duty as an uncle. I wish to know if this happiness which is promised to my niece will be enduring.”

“Oh, I can answer for that!”

“I wish, above all, to be assured that he, this intruder, is not displeasing to her, and that when she is alone with him, far away from me, she will not regret her uncle’s house. For after all, if I were to be the cause of my Séverine’s unhappiness, and merit that she should address to me such words of reproach as these: ‘Uncle, why did you give me to a villain? I thought I loved him, it was for you to see that I was deceiving myself; I gave him credit for every good quality, and he has none, and I am bound to him for life, and you did not warn me, and my days henceforth will be passed in despair, at the side of a being whom I abhor. Ah! uncle! why did you make me so happy with you, to leave me so wretched in the power of another?’”

“No, unele, I shall never say that,” cried a sly voice, that of Séverine, who had entered the room unheard either by Béraudy or Lobel, with the precaution that she took to glide into her uncle’s study when she knew he was occupied on his great philosophical work. No one had informed her of Monsieur Armand’s presence, otherwise she would never have caused this unexpected interruption which seemed almost like a piece of indiscretion.

“What! you were there,” cried the old man, “and you never tell me to be silent when I was tormenting this poor fellow?”

"Certainly not, uncle ; I've only just this moment come, and I understand nothing, I assure you, of the scraps of conversation that I surprised, if it be not that you are afraid I am unhappy, and I don't see anyone here who would cause me the least grief."

"Come, it's certainly a plot," said the old man gaily, "and, in order not to be defeated, the best plan after all is to grant certain liberties. So in future, Monsieur Lobel, you can present yourself in the Rue de l'Arcade, any day you think good, and any hour of the day, provided, or otherwise, with a bouquet, but always having tender words on your lips and a heart overflowing with love. You will always encounter there Mademoiselle Séverine, whom I authorize to await you, permitting her to forget her uncle, in your favour, during your visit, provided that she remembers him again directly after your departure."

"Fie ! you naughty uncle," protested the young girl, "to suspect me of not having a good enough memory to think of two people at the same time."

Béraudy rose to kiss his niece, and on the pretence that he had to go and look for a book in his library, went into the next room.

"How he loves you, and how you love him !" cried Armand, as soon as he was alone with Séverine. "What man would be mad enough to attempt to struggle against such affection ?"

"Have not more doubtful victories often been won ?" replied the young girl.

"So you, too, mademoiselle, you would see me without regret cross the threshold of this house ? You would leave your hand in mine, and your eyes in mine, for me to better read your heart ?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Alas ! business will keep me away from you but too often."

"In that case, I shall call your business names; but the moment which will follow the long waitings will seem to me so delicious that I sha'n't be angry with it long."

"My fortune, too, would be but a modest one if I was not employed—"

"Don't mention the name of fortune. The jingling of gold sounds so false beside two hearts which beat in unison. I know that you have embarked in politics, the most noble of careers if one has only in view the happiness of one's fellow countrymen, the most despicable if one only thinks of imposing upon them; now, I know that you are a man of heart."

"Give me your hand."

"There it is," said the young girl deliberately.

"I swear to you that, be the temptation what it may, I will never deserve ill of my country nor of you, and never shall oath be more faithfully kept."

"You have each of you got a hand free," said Béraudy, coming into the room again, having, purposely, no doubt, devoted a great deal of time to the finding of his book; "well, I claim it."

The next day, Armand thought it his duty, before continuing to pay his addresses, to state to Monsieur Béraudy his exact pecuniary position: if his post only brought him in about fifteen thousand francs a year, his private fortune, on the other hand, hardly amounted to a third of that sum. But at the first word Béraudy stopped him.

"Did Séverine question you on this subject? No! Then why should you think I am more curious than she?"

From that day forward, Armand came every afternoon, heralded in the morning by a bouquet of white flowers. But a cloud darkened this happiness which was so near being perfect. This was Madame Béchart's persistence in writing to him, although he had plainly informed her of his

desire to regain his liberty. He had decided not to answer the daily four pages from a tearful mistress whom he had never loved, and whom chance, much more than a real fancy, had thrown into his arms. And, moreover, he had no reason to reproach himself for his conduct towards the lady, which had always been that of a gallant man, and he only claimed what was his incontestable right in breaking off a connection which was without end as without attraction.

This right the forsaken mistress denied him, and, full of apprehension, he said to himself that a fit of exasperation would be sufficient to make this woman disclose to Séverine their former relations, that is to say, to inflict a terrible blow on the young girl ignorant of the past. Armand profited by a moment when the correspondence seemed less regular, to come to a definite understanding on the date of the marriage. They agreed upon the twenty-fifth of the following month, and upon that Lobel thought it right to inform Monsieur Cardillan, his chief, almost his friend, of the grand project which he was on the point of putting into execution.

Cardillan, although only thirty-nine, occupied a very high position in the republican party, which he had conquered and knew how to retain his hold on by the specious exterior of an eminent man. A child of Arles, where he had contracted, beneath the heat of the Provençal sky, the contagious passion of verboseness, endemic in that exuberant land, he had at once become infatuated with admiration for those bold tribunes, who, from the height of the rostra, had defended the people in the midst of the cries of patricians.

In the opinion of this school-boy, for whom words were already everything and deeds nothing, the true greatness of Rome consisted but in the oratorical struggles, and Scipio, said he, would not have been worthy to untie the shoe-latchet of his grandsons, the Gracchi. After his studies were over, he would often collect his comrades under one of

the vomitories of the arena, and there, inspired doubtless by the historic stones which surrounded him, would essay long discourses. Never was he so happy as when one of his fellow-pupils raised an objection. He raised himself then on his feeble legs to the full height of his little body, and buttoning with an imposing gesture his tunic patched at the elbow, he silenced the interrupter with one of those phrases, brief, to the point, epitomizing a subject, and which, crashing down on the opposing argument, reduces it to nothingness. Afterwards, when he was studying law at Nîmes, he frequented the clubs, meetings, comitia, all places where he had a chance of haranguing a crowd, leaping upon a table, a chair, anything, provided that his head and his arm showed above the bystanders, that his words might be heard and his gesticulations seen.

At twenty-three, having been called to the bar, he had come to Paris. His first auditors had been his drinking companions, before whom he expounded theories of government as obscure as the clouds of smoke in which he held forth. He had doubtless encountered numerous opposers amongst this youth of the Quartier Latin, always mad on politics, but he had also found devout admirers, ambitious, beardless youths, who, more superficial even than their idol, had predicted for him a great future, and had thought it prudent to follow in his wake. At twenty-eight, having been elected deputy for Gard, the ancient theatre of his first efforts in oratory, he had been one of those who during the last years of the Empire had helped to break up its already declining power.

It was the war of 1870 which had brought him into contact with Lobel. The young man possessed almost everything which the south countryman lacked, a great deal of modesty, and a wholesome judgment founded on deep study and real ability, precious qualities which Cardillan deemed capable of complementing his own inflated and superficial talent. He

had at once attached him to his own fortunes. But instead of its being Cardillan who indicated to Lobel the measures to be taken, it was, on the contrary, Lobel who pointed out with amazing exactness the treatment of delicate points, the objections to raise to such and such a project of law, the answers to make to the attacks directed against the party.

When the secretary had in a few words furnished the outlines, Cardillan, trusting to his extraordinary facility of assimilation, mounted the tribune resolutely, where he embellished his harangue with that vigour of expression which closed the mouth of contradiction, and gave him every day more authority over his colleagues. In this collaboration, which was unknown to the majority of the world, Lobel was the inspiration, Cardillan the verbose exponent, the amplification which created brilliant variations on a given subject ; and, as is almost always the case, it was the actor who received the applause to the detriment of the author who remained behind the scenes. When Armand presented himself before Cardillan at his little house in the Rue d'Anjou, at a time which was unusual with him, the deputy was still in bed. He thought it was some important political news, and gave orders to admit the young man at once.

"Dear Monsieur Cardillan," said the latter, after having shaken hands, "I am come to-day to talk about myself ; I am going to be married."

"I knew it," replied Cardillan.

"Who told you, then ?"

"One Béchart—"

"Béchart !" repeated Armand, knitting his brows.

"Yes, a second clerk in the Beaux-Arts office, I believe ; I have his card among my papers, any way. We'll make a chief clerk of him, one of these days, for he is animated by the best intentions towards you, my dear Lobel, and I con-

sider that any one who renders you a service, renders me one."

"And what did he tell you about my marriage?"

"He made some very sensible remarks, of which I am sure you will admit the justice. Sit down and listen to me. It is Mademoiselle de Méras, it appears, whom you are thinking of marrying?"

"You are quite right."

"The sister of that gentleman famous for his successes and still more for his quite recent marriage with Lucie Guépin, the star of the Folies-Parisiennes, who, during four months, to my knowledge, was old Kolbach's mistress?"

"De Méras says not."

"And everyone well knows that such is the case. Well, my young friend, I will come to the point at once; people don't marry the sisters of men like that!"

"That he is frivolous, or even ridiculous, I agree," replied Lobel, "but a scamp I swear he is not— Besides, his fortune—"

"His fortune! You are joking, Armand! Twenty to twenty-five thousand francs a year, perhaps. It is true that, thanks to Berthe Pompon, Lucie Guépin, and many others, he has always spent from a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand francs a year, which kind of thing has its name in Parisian slang and even in the theatres: libertines of his description are called spongers!"

"It's impossible!" cried Lobel, seeing all his dearest hopes shattered at one blow by Cardillan's revelations. "You are mistaken; De Méras is an honourable man!"

But Cardillan grew gradually warmer, became the man of the tribune again, imagining he had a crowd before him, and putting on again the poses and gesticulations of a theatrical orator brought up in a good school.

"That which is impossible is that Armand Lobel, my

secretary and my friend, should connect his stainless name with one so tarnished. One will be able to read to-morrow in the Opposition papers, that the *alter ego* of Cardillan, the coming minister, has picked up his wife in the mire—”

“Sir !”

“But certainly,” he continued, with an eloquent movement of his arm, “I admit that Mademoiselle de Méras, from the instant you love her, has incontestably all the qualities which one desires in a lawful wife ; I admit even that the public dishonour of her brother detracts in no degree from her personal respectability, for me, for you, for all those who are not of the Opposition. What a splendid subject for an article—the government falling instinctively again into the gutter from which it should never have wished to raise itself ! Ah, a nice tale to make up about the coming ministers, who will fill up all the posts they will have rendered vacant by arbitrary dismissals, with ignoramuses, unworthy supporters, and rogues ! They will throw it in our teeth that we empty the prisons to fill up our list of prefects and sub-prefects ; the gossips will describe our coming official fêtes, each guest at which will be well-known to the police, and where those most patronized will have acquired their title to consideration by figuring every evening in suspicious company, on the outer boulevards, at the entrance to the Faubourg Montmartre, between twelve and two in the morning.”

He grew intoxicated with his words, exaggerating everything, not allowing Lobel to get a word in, and leading up in all his arguments to that narrow, political interest, to that superficial and conventional respectability which would, perhaps, have permitted him to ally himself with a felon whose crime was unknown, but never to a man whose disgrace was public. In concluding, he tried to convince his auditor that the effect of such a marriage would be disastrous in the

high political spheres which surrounded and supported them, and in which all the world knew that Lobel was as good as appointed under secretary of State to the future President of the Council. Armand was thunderstruck. Always weak and like a child in the hands of this false man of talent, of whom he alone, perhaps, knew the real mediocrity, and who yet dominated him, now he rebelled.

"Perish rather my whole political future than that I should abandon Mademoiselle de Méras!" cried he.

"You are mad!"

"What matters that to you if I place my resignation in your hands?"

"You won't do that," returned Cardillan quickly, turning pale. "Reflect. Your career is a splendid one, and then, I may have need of you. Ah! love cannot easily keep pace with ambition!"

"And if all that is said about De Méras is untrue? I cannot believe, for my part, that his fortune does not exist."

"Inform yourself, then. But Monsieur Béchart's statements were furnished to me, I swear it, with proofs."

"I know where I can learn the truth," said Armand, going towards the door.

"But you will remain with me?" concluded Cardillan, in an almost suppliant voice.

"Ah, I don't know—I'm unable to make up my mind at the present moment. Give me at least four-and-twenty hours to regain possession of my faculties, for I assure you I can neither see nor understand anything."

He left Cardillan, running up against the furniture in the drawing-room, and being obliged to hold on by the banisters to prevent himself falling to the bottom of the stairs. He rushed to the Rue de l'Arcade, and entering Monsieur Béraudy's room suddenly: "Is all that I've been told about De Méras true?" cried he, gasping with emotion. "Is it true

that he has only twenty thousand francs a year? That his luxury has always been paid for by his mistresses? That his marriage was only a speculation?"

"It is all true," murmured the old man, hanging his head. "I did not know you were unaware of it, otherwise I should have informed you long ago."

"Then—" replied Lobel, not daring to finish the sentence he had on his tongue.

"Then?" asked Monsieur Béraudy, fixing his eyes on Armand with an expression of terrible agony.

"Then?" asked Séverine, who had just come in, attracted by the unusually loud tones of her lover.

"Then, mademoiselle—the marriage cannot take place on the day fixed—for I must—make inquiries—invent a means—what, I know not—Ah! my friends, I am so wretched!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ON the day following the wedding, De Méras had become metamorphosed ; the prodigal lover of former days had become the economical, the almost parsimonious, husband. To begin with, he dismissed half the servants, sold the horses and carriages given to Lucie by Kolbach, and kept only a phaeton for his own use. He was within an ace of sacrificing that too, in his ardour for reform, but his mania for driving, his eagerness to cut a figure in the Bois, overcame him, and he kept it up at the expense—but a trifling one—of the matrimonial budget.

The free “table d’hôte,” which about fifteen parasites invaded daily, was also put a stop to ; De Maurèves, Fridoret, Robin, Mimès, Pipert, Madame Blaizinot and the Bécharts all received a circular which informed them that they were no longer to present themselves in the Rue La Boétie to lunch or dine unless they had been invited in due form. Lucie protested, especially against the expulsion of the Bécharts and Madame Blaizinot.

“Observe that I don’t forbid these ladies to come and see you during the day,” he replied, “only, I don’t intend to feed them any longer !”

“Oh ! for the trifle that it costs !” hazarded Lucie. “The poor women aren’t happy, especially Madame Blaizinot. Let her at least take her meals here.”

“Why that old mischief-maker more than the others ? And how comes it, I beg, that we owe her an alimentary pension ?”

"You must be mean!" cried Lucie, crossly. "It's like my brougham that you sold. A convenient thing for me who am always on the move!"

"Well, my dear, there are cabs."

"If you think I'm going to do without them!" said she, in a tone of defiance.

"I was certain of it! There she is, mad against me! There, do you think it's for the sole pleasure of making myself disagreeable to you that I'm cutting down the expenses of the house? Why, my dear, we aren't rich! You earn a great deal of money, it's true, but suppose you fall ill or lose your voice, we should be at once reduced to beggary, certainly to beggary! Fortunately, silly girl, I'm more prudent than you, and I'm putting by a little something for you to fall back upon in the future."

"Oh, future be hanged! People always cock their toes before it comes, this future, and then they look pretty fools! They might just as well profit by the present, it's more certain."

"Enjoy yourself, then, but enjoy yourself rationally."

"Ah, yes, rationally! After all, you're master," said she, with a resigned pout.

He soon proved to her that he was so undoubtedly, but she let herself be led quietly, from weakness and carelessness, and also because, at heart, she well knew that her interests would be better defended by Hector than by herself. Besides, it bored her, all this money business! He might just as well keep the management of their fortune to himself; she would have been too much imposed on by everyone, and especially by the managers. She was too well known! They would have made her give her consent to anything they liked. And then it wasn't for a woman to struggle after the pieces! She would rest contented with singing, and De Méras would make the terms. He must

make himself useful in some sort of way ! At the end of the month, after having received his wife's salary, De Méras went up to see Jarly. According to her agreement, Lucie was the property of the impresario in summer as in winter, for no regular leave had been stipulated for. The lion's share principle entered too largely into these conditions, and it was important to have them amended, said De Méras to himself. He entered the director's room, his hat on his head, and finishing the counting of the roll of bank-notes which the cashier had given him.

"Ah, the nabob !" cried Jarly, on seeing him. "She brings you in enough, your lawful wife ! I hope you're not coming to complain that I don't pay dearly enough for her ?"

"For the present, I make no remark ; but, a short time hence, we shall probably ask you for an increase."

"Oh, there's no hurry, you know."

"Get along, old skinflint ! At present, it's only a question of a diminution of your budget of expenses, for we're liberally inclined, and don't wish for your ruin ; to come to the point, Lucie simply wishes to be at liberty during four months of the year."

"Oh, impossible, quite impossible !" cried Jarly.

"So be it, we shall cancel the agreement."

"There are fifty thousand francs forfeit, don't forget that."

"I forget nothing. Besides, we can lay our hands on fifty thousand francs. And I warn you, out of charity, that, once disengaged, we've made up our minds to set out for London and St. Petersburg, at both of which places we're offered three hundred thousand francs for the season. And then, I may be mistaken, but I don't fancy the Folies-Parisiennes much without Lucie."

Jarly had become deadly pale.

It was a case of speedy failure, of course, for he might as well accept the evidence, it was Guépin alone who

brought in all the money. The latest operettas in which she had played were more than mediocre, and yet, thanks to Lucie, they had realised the maximum receipts during a hundred performances. Now, by whom replace this unique "diva?" As if it was easy to discover a new star any day! And then, would the one who succeeded her exercise the same attraction on the public? What! lose his prey for a shadow! It would have been a folly which Jarly was too practical to commit; so, having turned the matter well over, he saw that, whether he liked it or no, it was wisest to submit to the demands of this indispensable artiste. De Méras, very confident, was walking the office with careless step, his hands in his pockets, awaiting Jarly's answer, having purposely left him to his reflections for a few minutes.

"Well, what's your decision?" he asked, on seeing him raise his head.

"Hang it! since I can't do otherwise, I must needs agree to your ultimatum; but it's like strangling me."

"When shall we sign?"

"Why, this evening, if you've time to call," said Jarly quickly, fearing, if he temporised further, some fresh and burdensome addition to De Méras's demands.

"You know well that I come to fetch my wife every evening," said Hector.

"That's true, and aren't you jealous now! Oh, you used not to be such an Othello; why, it used even to be the worthy Kolbach who mounted guard over Lucie. One would have said he had a procuration from you to watch over her virtue in your room and stead."

Hector made a gesture of impatience.

"You thought so too, you? You're as big a fool as the others then? At any rate, other times, other manners," said he. "One is never responsible for a mistress, whilst

if people were to see me less attentive to Lucie now, they would not fail to accuse me of being too complacent; they would say, and you before any one, that I speculated on my wife's beauty."

"But how he makes himself amends out of her talent!" murmured Jarly.

As soon as the fresh arrangement between the director of the Folies-Parisiennes and himself had been concluded, Hector found himself up to his ears in work. His letters, addressed to French and foreign theatrical agents, spread to the four corners of the earth, informing these gentlemen on what terms Lucie Guépin would give performances. These varied according to the importance of the town: fifteen hundred and two thousand francs an evening in the large cities; smaller towns were only drawn on to the extent of one thousand or twelve hundred francs, and always travelling expenses and a percentage on the receipts. These terms often seemed excessive, and a reduction would be asked for, which De Méras alone granted or refused, for Lucie, as a general rule, was not even consulted. But then, what work for the man who had to make these arrangements, to send off these answers, often at great length. At least this labour was not undertaken in vain; the journeys were very fruitful, if they did only last a short time. And it was impossible, too, to satisfy all the demands. Ah! if Lucie had only been kept in Paris six months instead of eight, what a nice little pile the couple would have amassed every year!

At least they did not lose a moment of the leisure Jarly allowed them. Hardly had the curtain fallen on Lucie Guépin's last performance at the Folies-Parisiennes, than the couple hastily regained the conjugal abode, had supper in the midst of a confusion of parcels to pack, trunks to finish off hurriedly, slept an hour or two, woke at dawn, and

set off by the first express in the morning ; generally speaking, Lucie was on the stage two hours after her arrival. In truth, she had only to go from the hotel to the theatre, where she found all her things ready in her dressing-room.

Hardly had he left the train than De Méras's first care was to convey in a carriage ordered by telegraph the box containing the necessaries for Lucie's make-up, and all the dresses and wigs which he knew she would want. After having given his instructions to the hairdresser and dresser for the changes after each act, he rushed off to the manager's room, handed over to him the properties brought from Paris, gave him exact instructions as to the arranging of the scenes and any particulars as to the treatment of certain parts of the play, had an interview with the leader of the orchestra to arrange with him the nuances to be observed, "allegro here, piano there," and finally rejoined his wife, who had had her hair dressed and was only waiting for her diamonds. In the country, as in Paris, these diamonds never left Hector's person. He kept them shut up, under protection of a secret lock, in a Russian leather case, and only entrusted them to the "diva" during the performance, to take them from her again at the end of the last act.

During the course of the evening he went and occupied the orchestra stall which had been reserved for him, and only left off clapping his hands to pour out admiring exclamations, stamp with enthusiasm, or stand up, waving his hat frantically, in the hope of provoking an ovation. It was necessary to warm up the frigid, rustic audiences a little ; in Paris he was too well known to animate the theatre in this way, but in the country he made up for lost time. The next morning, on rising, in order to get good notices, Hector paid visits to the influential critics, who, much flattered at the attention, composed in the first rush of inspiration a provincially dithyrambic article. A turn was taken round

the clubs, too, in order to persuade those gentlemen to take boxes or stalls who had been already favourably inclined by the alluring notices with which the walls were profusely placarded.

In the winter, in Paris, after leaving the Folies-Parisiennes at twelve o'clock, Lucie sang at soirées five or six times a week. Her success here was greater perhaps than at the theatre. Men of all ages crowded together around her, almost touching her, felt profoundly the siren's rather fleshly charms, and she, as if she took a pleasure in augmenting the voluptuous agitation which she caused in them, cast her fascinating glance upon each of them in turn, already disturbed by the caressing tones of her voice. The women, in their turn, were especially attracted by her reputation for virtue. Lucie was married, as were they, belonging almost to their circle through De Méras, with the artiste's halo in addition, and the irresistible prestige of being all the rage. She was their spoiled child, whom they petted with motherly attentions and wheedlings :

"How modest she looks !"

"Dear pet, take care you don't catch cold."

"A cup of tea, my pretty one ? It's hot, but very weak ; it was made purposely for you, and it can't affect your nerves."

When she was about to withdraw, some ladies would rush after her to help her put on her pelisse, which they buttoned themselves, and closed it hermetically in front, so as better to protect the chest. And the "diva" did not easily obtain her permission to go, as people were never weary of listening to her. All her songs were encored again and again ; hardly had she finished one than she was asked for another. Tired, breathless, she would have good-naturedly exhausted her repertory to make herself agreeable, if her husband had not made her a sign from a corner of the room

to leave off. If the audience still insisted, De Méras approached the master of the house discreetly, and whispered to him that all the songs on the programme had been sung.

"Certainly, but, as a favour, one more song, or there will be an insurrection amongst my guests. Come, Monsieur de Méras, intercede for us with your wife."

"The fact is we are very tired," replied Hector. "Well, since you insist—"

And the next day De Méras sent to collect the money for his bill, with an addition of two hundred francs. It was he, moreover, who now kept the conjugal strong box. He paid all the bills, including those of the butcher, the baker, and the confectioner, for he had reserved to himself the ordering of the house, to allow his wife, as he said, to devote herself entirely to art. The milliner and dressmaker had to address themselves to him alone; he himself chose Lucie's dresses and hats and paid the bills, ready money always, so as to take advantage of the discount. Nevertheless Lucie, who was often without pocket-money, did not complain, and submitted passively without a murmur to the penury which her husband's despotism imposed on her. So De Méras stated freely to whomsoever cared to listen, "that he had married a treasure," and he had already amassed nearly a million, when one day Madame Blaizinot announced to Lucie that she had a surprise for her.

"What is it? Oh, tell me quick!" cried the young woman. And suddenly clapping her hands: "Ah! if my presentiments have not deceived me—"

"And these presentiments told you—"

"That Oscar has returned, perhaps."

"Well, they haven't lied, my darling. Our dear one is here, below, in the street. Would you like me to call him?"

"Yes, certainly, and at once, too!"

Lucie was radiant and frisked about like a child. On learning that he was there, close to her, that dear Oscar, all the love for him which she had retained during his absence rose in her heart.

Madame Blaiziot walked to the window without delay, and threw it up quickly. "Come along, come along, sonny," cried she, gesticulating, her body hanging out over the window-sill.

A minute afterwards Oscar was seen through the door, his face grave, his hand thrust into his coat in a Napoleonic attitude. Lucie was standing in the middle of the room, tears in her eyes, a smile on her lips, and her arms stretched out in readiness to enfold the dearly loved one. The actor rushed towards Lucie with the studied precipitation of a young lover who runs to meet the coquette, and both remained in one another's arms, too much affected to be able to express in words the happiness with which they were filled. Oscar, not without a visible effort, managed to free himself from this mutual embrace. Not before it was time; De Méras entered. At the sight of Madame Blaiziot and, above all, of Oscar, he was unable to repress a gesture of anger.

"Sir," said he, drily, "be good enough to recollect for the future that Lucie Guépin has become Madame de Méras, and that no one presents himself here but with my consent."

"Well, well," retorted the comedian, "there's nothing to be so proud about!"

De Méras, without answering a word, pointed to the door as a sign of dismissal for the mother and son.

"The wretch, he threatens a woman!" exclaimed the actor, placing himself in front of Madame Blaiziot to protect her with his body.

And as Hector shrugged his shoulders:

“Good, we go out,” said Oscar, “but we go out carrying our heads high.”

He effected his retreat with Madame Blaizinot with slow steps, as if to show plainly that he only went of his own free will.

“My dear,” said Hector to Lucie, as soon as the Blaizinots had disappeared, “at home, as in the theatre, I abhor these players, so just arrange that I don’t come across any more here.”

“Well, that’s rather too strong!” cried Lucie, who rebelled at last, after having with difficulty contained herself. “It’s come to this, that I can’t see my comrades at my own house.”

And in her exasperation she avenged herself on the lace of her dressing-gown, with which her little nervous fingers played havoc.

CHAPTER XV.

WITH a variableness very frequent in the minds of women who have married the man whose mistress they have formerly been, Lucie felt singularly undeceived with regard to her feelings towards De Méras. This gentleman, of irreproachable family, mixing with the best society, friendly with the most influential politicians, in lowering himself to the former chorus singer of the Folies-Parisiennes, in making himself her showman, demeaned himself and most certainly lost in value ; the husband had destroyed the prestige of the lover. Hector, for his part, who appeared to have had all moral sense obliterated, and all affection for Lucie wiped out by his marriage, only looked upon the partnership of De Méras and Guépin as a business concern out of which it was expedient to make large profits. The relations between the husband and wife had thus become very strained, and, on the sudden arrival of Blaiziot, Lucie was quite disposed to continue an intimacy which had been too abruptly broken off. Osear, exasperated at the reception he had met with from De Méras, had, without delay, “sharpened his trusty Toledo pen,” and the next day, on her way to rehearsal, the “diva” found with the door-keeper at the theatre a note addressed to her and couched in these terms :

MY DEAR LUCIE,—Travelling renders still more proud characters naturally independent. That is to say, that the nobleness of my soul cannot reconcile itself in future to a

reception like that which your—husband gave me yesterday. Henceforward, then, I shall keep at a distance from the Rue La Boétie, and shall endeavour to exist on memories, since they are all that remain to me.

OSCAR.

“Poor darling!” murmured the young woman; “Hector has offended him!”

Two hours afterwards she alighted from her carriage in the Faubourg Saint-Denis, and went up to Madame Blaiziot’s. Oscar was just returning from a visit to an agent who had offered him a very good engagement in Cochin-China. On seeing Lucie, he put on a dignified air, and immediately, in a grave and ceremonious voice:

“Be seated, madame!” he declaimed.

“What! you stand on ceremony with me now?” asked she with a reproachful pout.

“Certainly,” replied Oscar, coldly, “a fashionable lady like you—one can no longer address her familiarly.”

“You great stupid!” said she, taking his face in her little gloved hands, “should I ever be a fashionable lady for you?”

“Oh, I’m not a fool! At any rate, I abide by what I wrote you this morning.”

“What you wrote me? A lot of rubbish! Ah! America doesn’t agree with you. I advise you not to go back there again.”

“Therefore I’ve given up the idea of it, and Asia will suit me better, perhaps, for—you don’t know?—In a few days, I set out for Cochin-China.”

“It isn’t true,” she cried, becoming suddenly pale.

“Word of honour!”

“In other words, you love me no more, and you are willing to separate yourself from me again?”

"I wish to owe nothing to anyone," said Blaizinot emphatically.

Lucie had fallen on a chair, and two great tears rolled from her eyes. As for Blaizinot, he whistled with an indifferent air the song from "*Les Cloches*,"

"Va, petit mousse,
Le vent te pousse—"

"You take a pleasure, then, in causing me pain?" asked the young woman suddenly. And, rising, she threw herself on Blaizinot's knees and flung her arms round his neck.

"Would you blush, now, to owe anything to a friend like me? Come, my baby, consider, before setting off afresh, and remember the happy hours we've passed together. It's not so long ago, after all, and we were very happy, I, at least!"

Blaizinot thought it best to assure her that that was certainly the most pleasant recollection of his whole existence.

"And you would exile yourself again like a pariah when it only depends on you to enter once more upon the good old days? For, after all, whether those rascally directors give you an engagement or not, do you think you'll ever want? Sha'n't I be here, I, your Loloche, who is neither mean nor ungrateful, whatever you may think of her, and who will prove to you how thankful she is for everything you did for her long ago. Come, baby, look at me like you used to do. Must I go down on my knees before my lord? Come, a little smile for his Lucie; we've had enough of this quarrel. And if you still want to bolt off to the other side of the ocean, you'll have to do it with me; but this time, I promise you, we'll make them shell out, your Americans or Chinamen!"

Blaizinot had gradually melted. "Oh! women! women!" he cried in a sepulchral tone, throwing his arms in the air.

"It's agreed, you can tell Cochin-China to go and be hanged! You can believe me if you like, but I've never ceased to love you. It's a funny thing, all the same, how you keep hold of us you men."

He had to write a refusal to the agent in her presence.

"Good-bye, would-be colonist!" said she, as she took her departure. "I think, all the same, that you've come back for good to your native land—and to me."

She came again the next day, then the next, then every day, remaining for hours and hours in the little room in the Faubourg Saint-Denis during Madame Blaizinet's absence, who had always a pretext ready for leaving the lovers together, and who went to kill time in the porter's lodge, trying to convince the latter of Oscar's grand future as an actor.

But Lucie soon got tired of having to go every afternoon to the far end of the Faubourg. "Come to my place to-morrow; it will be simpler, and besides, we shall be more comfortable, be it said without offence, you susceptible fellow!" said she to Oscar.

"And Hector—?"

"Hector?—I can snap my fingers at him. Besides, from four to six he drives in the Bois in his phaeton, you can choose that time. And then, what if he does see you, it's all one to me, after all."

For the first two or three days Oscar took precautions, arriving on De Méras's heels and bolting off at a quarter to six; but soon he became ashamed of so much compliance, and presented himself at all hours of the day, with fatal results, for he ended by running up against the husband.

Trembling with rage, the latter rushed up to his wife's room and found her putting herself to rights in front of the glass. "So you've been playing the strumpet, my lady!" cried he, without even thinking of shutting the door behind him.

“ Ah ! it's you ? ” said Lucie, without turning round, and going on dressing herself in front of the cheval-glass.

“ What's up with you ? ”

“ I begged you not to receive that gentleman— ”

“ Do I prevent you from receiving anyone you think fit ? ”

“ A low stroller, ugly as an ape, and without a grain of talent ! ”

“ Ah ! how funny ! I who think him so handsome, so witty, so full of genius ! ”

“ If you think you're saying something smart— ” said De Méras, shrugging his shoulders.

“ Ah, I know well,” retorted Lucie, angrily, “ that he's neither elegant, nor distinguished, nor titled like you, but passion takes these blind fancies—I love him to that extent ; I will say more, I adore him ! ” De Méras had seated himself. “ Certainly I adore him ! ” she repeated in a tone of decision which left no room for doubt. “ To begin with, he was my first lover. Oh ! you needn't smile, my dear fellow, at any rate he's the only man for whom I've really felt any love, and if he hadn't so stupidly gone to America, you, to begin with, would perhaps never have touched me with the tips of your fingers ! ”

She was getting in a rage. For a trifle she would have thrown in his teeth the names of all her lovers present and past, to prove to him what a little place he held in her life.

“ Yes, but he shouldn't have gone to America,” replied he, rising, “ and I'm your husband ; as such, I'm master in my own house, and I'll kick this rascal out ! ”

This time Lucie swung round abruptly, her teeth set, her look exasperating and decided. “ Good, try it ! ” she cried, “ try it, and you'll see if I'm long following him ! Besides, you haven't got much cheek to dare to complain ! And of what, if you please ? Married life, my dear fellow, is, they say, only supportable on the condition of mutual conces-

sions ; you won't deny that I've done my share in allowing you to appropriate, invest, or spend the money which I alone earn ? Ah ! it's not a pleasant subject for you, and you frown ; I'm sorry for it, but you had only to avoid provoking me, and you would have avoided also these disagreeable truths. Very well then, go on arranging engagements or disengagements, tours or benefits, hoard or spend at your own sweet will, but, in return, leave me my lovers ! Fair exchange is no robbery !”

“ Ah, you're practical !”

“ Not as much as you ! However, to make you easy in your mind, for I know where the shoe pinches, be sure that I shall arrange things so that the rich pay for the poor ; that will adjust the balance, and you won't lose anything by it,” she added with a sneer.

“ You are cynical, even !” said De Méras, who had difficulty in concealing his anger.

“ There's plenty of room for it in this house, my dear fellow !”

“ Have you made up your mind, madame ?”

“ Absolutely.”

“ Be it so, I will think over the course for me to take,” said he, leaving the room.

“ Yes, yes, think it over as much as you like, my man, but I defy you to deprive me of my Oscar !” She could not get over it. What a cheek he had, that Hector ! “ Get along, low fellow !”

She would not think of it any more, so as not to upset her nerves ; but it was stronger than she. Every now and then she stamped, strode up and down her room, with undecided movements of her arms.

Madame Blaiziot came to see her during the day.

“ Ah, my dear, let me tell you !” said she, after having kissed her. And she recounted to her at full length the setting down she had given Hector.

"Why, he's mad, he's mad!" cried the old woman, who had not forgiven Hector for having, under pretext of economy, put an end to the fêtes, and, above all, the grand dinners at his house, of which she never missed one. "And besides, what is he here, my pet, that fellow? The master? Never! You supply the pieces, it's for you to give the orders. For, after all, you clothe him, lodge him, board him, him and his horses, you pay his card debts and the rest. They call such as him green-backs, my puss, all over the world, and if I was you I should send him off to be fished for elsewhere. There's no lack of fish ponds in Paris. And how they stare at one, all this vermin. They pretend to look at you with disdain, as if you weren't as good as they, and not just as honest and more so—vagabonds!"

Lucie was absorbed, absent-minded, and no longer listening to Madame Blaizinot's imprecations.

"No, but truly, my angel," continued the old woman in the theatrical tones borrowed from her son, "there's only one way to treat rogues like that; sack 'em!"

On hearing this Lucie raised her head. Certainly, she had often thought of leaving Hector. But apart from his whims and his rare fits of jealousy, De Méras, after all, was not a bad sort of fellow, and willingly closed his eyes on her weaknesses. And then, she must confess it, Hector had done, and was still doing her invaluable service, without appearing to be aware of it. He had, above all, a rare talent for getting round the directors.

"You say that, my pet, because you've never made use of other men's advice in your affairs, but, without wishing to flatter my poor Oscar, there's a man for you for that kind of thing, and of a different kind to your De Méras, not to mention that he's in your line, and isn't afraid to talk to all the whole clique of directors."

Lucie readily admitted Oscar's remarkable cleverness, but as for quarrelling with Hector—never!

"Thanks, that would make too much shindy," she added. "Little Guépin, the spoiled child of the Parisian public, the little bride of yesterday, about whose virtue the papers rave every evening and every morning, leaving her husband to go off with a lover! Oh! poetry! modesty! what would become of you? It would act like a wet blanket, to a dead certainty, my dear Madame Blaizinot, and I'm not up to defying the public to that extent yet."

Oscar had entered the room, unseen by Lucie, towards the end of the discussion.

"At any rate, it's not the less extraordinary," he cried all at once, planting himself in front of the actress, "that my mother and I, the two oldest friends of the house, should be obliged, like lepers, to come here on the sly, mount the back-stairs, watch for the husband's goings and comings, as if we had a crime on our consciences. We are poor, but honest, we are," added he, striking his chest in a burst of indignation, "and if I thought that people here blushed for my mother—!"

"Oh, what a horrid thought!" returned the young woman quickly, but evidently confused. "It didn't occur to you, at least, Madame Blaizinot?"

"Well, my pet, when you haven't got a sou you are so apt to be despised. In the first place, you get head over ears in debt, more's the pity! Mustn't you eat and drink and be clothed? And then, all that gets about, and people don't think the better of you for it. And then, you have to borrow, and don't always pay back, because there are two of you have to live. And especially when the directors are idiots enough not to make use of my Oscar's talents. The reason is they're afraid of having to pay him too much. And he's proud, too, is my boy. He has sworn never to

apply to these fools, and he's right. The day will come—and it's not far off—when they'll come and entreat him to accept a part, and when they'll carry him in triumph on to the stage. But in the meantime, from his delicacy, he conceals his precarious condition from his friends. Ah! forsooth, there's no danger of his breathing a word about it, the poor dear, and, like other honest people, we haven't a dozen different ways of scraping up money—”

“You're very much put about at the present moment, then, poor Madame Blaizinet?”

“To tell the truth, the butcher refuses credit now. There's another who doesn't believe in Oscar. It's true that we haven't fallen out with the confectioner yet, because of the theatre-tickets we give him, three days a week; but the baker's beginning to be nasty when I go into his shop, and the green-grocer doesn't care for theatres, so we don't know what way to go to work with her. All that, without reckoning the landlord. Oscar had to invite a friend of his to dinner and get two seats for the opera out of him to give them to this swindler. Well, to cut the matter short, two thousand francs would enable me to meet our most pressing needs. It isn't much, after all, two thousand francs.

“And to think that I haven't got a sou of my own, or rather that I can dispose of in any way. Even my jewellery, I don't have the care of it; Hector sees after everything, shuts it up, puts it under lock and key! It's come to this, that I can't scrape up a hundred francs, a wretched hundred francs, when he isn't here, without borrowing of the servants!”

And striking her forehead, in unfeigned vexation,

“Ah! it's miserable, miserable!” she continued. “What can I do, good heavens? Ask him when he comes home. He will want to know whom it is for, and at the name of Blaizinet—”

"You see, my son," said Madame Blaizinot abruptly, "in this world you must never get into trouble if you want to preserve your illusions about your friends!"

"That's quite true, that is, mamma," said Oscar, seizing the hand which his mother held out to him!

"So, even she, Oscar, she, your pupil, deserts you. Come along, come, for I've no more the heart than you to go down on my knees to these bad, rich people."

Lucie was in despair, wringing her hands, her eyes fixed and wet with tears, and seeking vainly for some way out of the difficulty.

As they walked towards the door—with a purposed slowness though—she ran and stood in their way.

"Ah! you pain me," she murmured with a sob. "But I will not remain under the weight of such a supposition on your part, and I swear to you on all that I hold most sacred that, cost what it may, you shall have this money, and not later than to-morrow."

"Really!" cried the old woman turning sharp round. "Poor dear pet! I knew that you weren't like the others. You, at least, have a heart that beats. Kiss her, Oscar, do! You may be proud, my boy, of having chosen, to love, such a woman!"

They shook hands on a fresh promise of Lucie's.

The latter employed all the time before her husband's return in fortifying herself in her resolution, and when Hector sprang out of his phaeton in the court-yard, she had made up her mind to ask him for the money promised to Oscar.

"Is dinner ready? I'm as hungry as a wolf," said De Méras, walking into his wife's room with a careless air, as if he had already forgotten the morning's scene. On reflection, he had come to the conclusion that the most dignified attitude on his part was one of perfect indifference.

"As soon as you like ; but, first of all, give me two thousand francs," replied Lucie in a firm voice.

"For what purpose?"

"That's my business!"

"But I must enter their destination in my book ; so my question is surely not indiscreet," returned Hector quietly.

"That's good ! Monsieur de Méras, you seem to me to forget that the money placed in your hands is mine ! This is the second time since this morning that you have forced me to remind you of the fact !"

"I beg pardon, it is ours," observed Hector coldly. "We married, don't forget this, on the principle of share and share alike."

"In other words, you refuse me the money I want?"

"I refuse you nothing, I simply ask for an explanation ; for do me justice to admit," said De Méras, smiling, "that if I control your expenses, at least I never say a word to you on the subject. But, performing the functions of a cashier in the house, I ought to, and I believe I do, fulfil them conscientiously. Never is one of your milliner's or dressmaker's bills presented to me twice for payment ; the daily expenses of the house are scrupulously met ; my books are kept up to date and, thanks to this wise principle, our fortune is ever increasing. Don't take it amiss, then, if the accountant meets you with a refusal which would certainly be raised by the husband, as soon as he became aware of the way in which you propose to employ the money asked for."

"And don't you take it amiss, either, if in future it is I who receive my salary and money for evening performances and from all sources !" cried Lucie, whom Hector's affected calm exasperated. "So, you understand perfectly ? The money won't come into this house, in future, without having first passed through my hands ; my jewellery will be given

back to me and entrusted to my sole care ; I shall become cashier in my turn, my dear fellow, since that is the only means by which I can secure the disposal of my own property."

"Why don't you say at once that you intend these two thousand francs for your strolling player, and that at this gentleman's first request you will give him as much more ? Ah, he's a pretty sponger, your Osear !"

"He doesn't cost me as much as you do, anyway !" muttered Lucie.

"Very well, we've said enough about it, haven't we ? Here are your two thousand francs," concluded Hector, taking them out of his pocket-book, and almost throwing them in the young woman's face. And, seizing his hat, which he thrust on his head, he said :

"You're in a hurry, doubtless, to go and break a crust with your player and madame his mother, in the Faubourg Saint-Denis ? By no means let me detain you ; I'll dine at the club."

On the way, Hector reflected that all his reasonings, his recriminations and his threats, instead of keeping Lucie away from her clown, would only serve to infatuate her the more with him. It was urgent to adopt a more practical plan, and that quickly, for this passion, which had been sleeping during more than a year, and was awaking in this way, might be the cause of complications disastrous to himself. Now that he had got into such a good position, he did not see the force of being turned out of it ; he had bought it at the price of his name, and even of some of his honour : it was worth a struggle, then. And to think that Lucie had only to take a fit into her head to escape one day from the conjugal abode to compromise afresh his whole future. However, one thing reassured him, which was that Blaiznot, who was very fast, did not content himself with Lucie, and

squandered, so it was said, Guépin's money with his little lady friends.

De Méras resolved to watch him, for the day he managed to prove to Lucie that her player was duping her, there was not a doubt that her spite—or even disgust—would cause her immediately to come to a rupture with him. Chance was not long in giving Hector the opportunity he wanted.

Since Blaizinet's return, little Irma Béchart was a more constant frequenter of the Rue La Boétie. She called at the house before and after her walks, and inquired with interest the hour of Lucie's rehearsals, as if it was most important for her to know at what time the actress would go out or come home again during the day. Thanks to this arrangement, she had managed to be alone several times with Oscar, who, on his part, did not ordinarily arrive until after Lucie's departure. This persistence in planning tête-à-têtes with him had flattered the actor's vanity, and without delay he had begun to pay attentions which were only too readily encouraged, and, little by little, the two lovers had devoted to one another every day one hour of tender intimacy, of which the olive room had hitherto preserved the secrets hidden in its quilted arm-chairs. This place of meeting suited both admirably. Irma, because in her quality of maiden she was not allowed to go out alone except to see her friend Lucie, and Blaizinet, because he would not on any pretext have introduced into his mother's home any other mistress than Lucie. Unfortunately, like all lovers, they were far from circumspect. They committed imprudences on imprudences, whispered to one another when they thought no one was looking at them, left doors open when they kissed, or exchanged too eloquent glances when others were present.

It was one of these eloquent "asides," accompanied by an expressive sign that De Méras had noticed, and which had

aroused his suspicions. A few days of observation had made him thoroughly acquainted with the lovers' habits, and one morning, taking Lucie aside, he asked her not to go to rehearsal. When she expressed her astonishment at this caprice of her husband's, and asked the reason of it,

"I want to show you something," he answered, "you will see. But I must make this condition, that you leave the house at the usual time, as if there was no change in the employment of your day; I engage, moreover, to bring you back at a fitting time. Is it agreed?"

"But still, I should like to know?"

"I promise you a surprise; that's all I can tell you at present."

"All right, it's agreed."

She was very much puzzled all the morning, far from imagining the kind of surprise which De Méras was arranging for her. At half-past one she went out, and awaited Hector at a friend's, as had been settled between them.

Not until a quarter to three did Hector appear; his face was quite beaming. "Come quickly!" said he, and he dragged Lucie off with him.

On arriving at the front gate he opened with his latch-key the little side-door, so as not to ring the bell, entered the hall, followed by his wife, without having attracted the attention of the servants who were in deep conversation in the back regions, and after having held his eye to a little slit made in the partition, he pushed his wife suddenly into the olive room. The moment could not have been better chosen. Irma, in significant disorder, was seated close against Oscar, who was folding her in his arms and covering her lips with kisses. The young girl's hair was hanging down her back, whilst her tortoiseshell comb, lying on the floor, bore testimony to the quite recent tender frolics.

"Oh, the little strumpet!" cried Lucie, seizing the young girl by her flowing hair, and forcing her to go down on her knees and disengage herself from the embrace of the stupefied Blaizinet.

"You, you!" stammered the latter.

Yet, without being at all disconcerted, Irma tried to pick up her comb in order to fasten up her hair, but before she had time to do so, Lucie had given it a kick and sent it flying, to be broken against the marble chimney-piece. The actress was not spiteful; so at the first cry of pain which the young girl uttered, she released her.

"There, get up, and out of this, harlot! And to think that no later than yesterday that thing was petting me, calling me her friend, and she comes and steals my lover, as if there were not plenty of men in the street for such filth as she!" And she added mentally: "Now if she had only taken Hector! But no, the trollop must take Oscar!" De Méras could hardly resist rubbing his hands; his plan had succeeded to a marvel. As for Blaizinet, he had not left the sofa where he sat as if petrified. Irma twisted her hair up under her hat, took her roll of music and left, shrugging her shoulders.

"Well, and you, what are you doing here, like a canary hidden up in your corner?—Shake yourself, do! There, you move my pity!" said Lucie, exasperated at the stupefied, clownish face.

"I hope you don't think—oh, no—in your house—I swear," stammered in a choked voice, as he looked alternately at Lucie and De Méras, the wretched actor whom the presence of his mistress's husband prevented from justifying himself as he would.

"The idiot, he denies it still, then!—Say rather that it was she who tempted you, the little prude, and that you didn't dare resist a woman!"

“That thing, a woman? with neither breasts, nor arms, nor legs, and a figure like a faggot!” And turning to De Méras: “Well, now, I ask you, Hector, isn’t it too bad to be ousted by a kid like that?”

As Blaiziot thought it decidedly more prudent to keep silence, “You’re right, indeed,” she continued, “don’t answer a word, I prefer that; but don’t let me catch you at it again, with her or any other; for another time, I promise you, I sha’n’t forgive you.”

“Well! that’s rather too strong,” muttered Hector. He went out exasperated, leaving Lucie alone with Oscar, who had just fallen into the arms which the young woman held out to him.

CHAPTER XVI.

LOBEL had left Monsieur Beraudy's house, his brain in a whirl, his heart crushed, reproaching himself passionately for the state of indecision against which he had not the strength to struggle. If he had only had some private fortune, he would have immediately placed his resignation in Cardillac's hands, and renounced without a regret the political career he had chosen years ago in his innocence, but of which, cruelly undeceived by this time, he was discovering the falseness and meanness. But would uncle Beraudy give his niece to a poor man? For what was his income of four or five thousand francs compared with Séverine's dowry, a dowry which one day would be further augmented by the fortune of the old man who had long since decided on leaving all his money to the young girl so as to make her portion equal that of her brother? And would he dare to offer himself again to his betrothed, powerless as he was to assure her that future which it had been his dream to offer her, and having no longer before him that brilliant career which had perhaps dazzled her!

What business on earth had Béchart to come and discover all De Méras's baseness to Cardillac? Had he some interest of his own to serve? It could only have been his sister-in-law who had forced him to take this step, in the certainty of breaking off by this means a match which roused her jealousy. Ah! unlucky day, when he had first yielded to the overtures of this shameless creature! At one time he

was on the point of going to the Bécharts to express to Juliette, in no measured terms, the scorn with which her disgraceful behaviour inspired him. But he reflected that she was a woman, after all, and a woman who had been abandoned for another, a fact that excused to a certain extent her cowardly act of revenge. Besides, had she not spoken the truth by the mouth of Béchart? That which he in his despair considered a blameworthy act, would have been regarded by many others as a most valuable service. If he had questioned himself calmly, he would have been forced to reply that it was in reality impossible for him, occupying as he did such a prominent position, to marry the sister of a De Méras. And at times he was eager to go and insult this shameless man, this elder brother who ought to have constituted himself the protector, the natural support of his young sister and, instead of this, was only a disgrace to her. On reaching home he shut himself up in his room, threw himself on a sofa, and remained there for hours, convulsed with fits of trembling, turning over in his mind a thousand impracticable plans.

As for Séverine, on hearing this man who adored her himself postpone the date of their marriage, which he had only the day before entreated uncle Béraudy to fix for as early as possible, she understood that something serious had happened. With that woman's instinct which is rarely at fault, her first thought had expressed itself in these words: "It is because of Hector!" Then she had cast away from her this supposition, which there was nothing to justify, and which she could never have believed, whatever proofs she might have had, so much did she love her brother. Even in the midst of her tears, of the complete collapse of her whole being, during which her uncle had drawn her gently on his knee, endeavouring to persuade her to trust to the future, she had placed her two hands on his mouth

as soon as she perceived that he was about to abuse Hector.

"No, no, uncle, do not accuse anyone, I beg of you. I understand all, and I don't complain," said she. And she tortured herself to smile, whilst her heart was breaking.

Béraudy was silent, but his lips, which continued to move without giving forth any sound, proved plainly enough that he was uttering to himself the maledictions which Séverine forbade him to speak aloud. He left the room noiselessly as soon as the young girl's first burst of tears had subsided, and she had fallen into that state of prostration which is inevitable after great grief. He dressed, and drove to the Rue La Boétie.

"Monsieur de Méras?" he asked of the footman who met him at the top of the steps.

"He is not yet in from the Bois," replied the servant; "he went out in the phaeton with madame, who had no rehearsal. Do you wish to wait for him, sir?"

"Certainly, I will wait for him."

The footman showed Béraudy into one of the rooms on the ground-floor. The old man hesitated at first to sit down; the carpet seemed to burn his feet. This new furniture seemed to him to be indelibly sullied, and he could not prevent himself, on looking at the long deep chair which, all disordered, was placed in front of the fireplace, from thinking of Kolbach who, as rumour had it, was Lucie's lover. He made a calculation of how many kisses or acts of shame that cabinet loaded with precious objects, or yonder Venetian glass or table in mosaic had cost, and the price of Lucie's venal complacencies seemed to him to be graven on each book in ineffaceable characters. The temptation came upon him to play havoc in this room, to break everything in it, so that there should remain none of this luxury which had been paid for with the honour of a family. At one time a curtain was raised, and Blaizinet thrust

through the opening his clean-shaven face which he drew back at once on seeing an unknown gentleman. Béraudy who, although a stranger in the society which De Méras affected, was perfectly aware of all that went on in the Rue La Boétie, saw at once in this hairless face the actor who was said to be his nephew's rival for Lucie Guépin's heart. At that moment a wild idea struck him; to entreat this clown to carry Lucie off, to take her away, far away, after having first squandered the money resulting from the sale of the house and of anything valuable contained in it, so as to leave Hector without a sou. But he restrained himself. And besides, Hector came into the room almost at the same moment, having gathered from the footman's description who the person was who was waiting for him in the drawing-room.

Lucie Guépin had been on the point of accompanying him, "to make it up," so she said, "with the old growler of an uncle." But Hector had quickly suppressed this desire to make acquaintance, well knowing from experience that Béraudy was not the man to yield to the effusiveness of a pretty actress, even though she was one of the family.

"Ah, here you are!" said the old man, rising. "I beg your pardon for having come and disfigured your wife's house, but I had something very serious to say to you—and—"

"You're vexed with me, uncle, for not coming to see you oftener, and especially for not having informed you of the date of my marriage; is it not so?"

"No, certainly not, for the papers have admirably supplied your place in that respect."

"Be assured, in any case, that in not sending you information of my intention, I had no other thought than that of not irritating you unnecessarily, since I knew beforehand that you were opposed to my plans. The same reasons prevented me from inviting you to the wedding, which was

quite private— Having said this much, and believing that I have righted myself with you, tell me, I beg of you, about yourself and my dear Séverine. What arrangements have been made for her marriage? It's a very long time since I saw Lobel."

"It was exactly about your sister's marriage that I came to talk to you, for this powerful motive was necessary, I assure you, to make me cross this threshold." There was silence for a moment.

"Learn then," continued Béraudy, "that Séverine's engagement is broken off, and through your fault."

"My fault?" echoed De Méras.

"Your fault," repeated the old man.

"And why, might I ask, uncle?"

"Because your scandalous way of life is so notorious that a respectable man will never make up his mind to marry the sister of Monsieur Hector de Méras."

"Yet I thought, that according to society's laws, marriage redeemed all past errors."

"In a woman, sometimes; in a man, never! Besides, your life for the last ten years, and at the present time, has been made too public in all its details for you to pretend to impose on anyone. Everyone knows on what Monsieur de Méras lived before his marriage, everyone knows on what he has lived since. Even to the strolling player, your companion in this shameful triple partnership, whose position here is known to all Paris."

"Proofs, uncle, I want proofs of what you state!"

"Proofs! Cardillan, the deputy, your friend Lobel's chief, he will give me proofs, for it was he himself who declared to Armand, that, on the eve of becoming an under-secretary of State, it was impossible for him to bestow his name on the sister of a De Méras!"

"He did not say that!"

“ Give me the lie, then, at once ! ”

De Méras hung his head, without replying to this exclamation of the honourable old man. The latter continued :

“ It is not my custom to strike a man when he is down, but I try sometimes, not to furnish means for him to raise himself, for there are falls which are irreparable, but to help him to do no more hurt, and especially to innocent people. Well, this woman—who has become your wife—nothing detains her in Paris, is it not so ? Cannot you, in the sacred interests of your sister, persuade her to try a voyage—which is certain to be a fruitful one—to some foreign country ? With her reputation, there can be no doubt that she can make even more brilliant engagements abroad than she can here. America, paved with dollars and bank-notes, might attract her. She gone, Paris will perhaps forget your scandalous union, and the name of De Méras will no longer appear at every instant in the papers, recalling—to the detriment of the sister—the baseness of the brother. Perhaps, even, Séverine will be asked in marriage by some respectable man, who will be able, even if he cannot himself believe, at least to make others believe that you have disappeared for ever, and thus obtain the world’s forgiveness for his choice of Mademoiselle de Méras.”

“ A pretty course you propose to me ! Besides it’s being useless, uncle, it is absolutely impracticable, and would certainly never bring about the consummation you wish for. What ! you know no better than to think that a star can cause herself to be forgotten by going abroad ? Why, read the accounts of the latest grand tours, and tell me if there is a step, if there is a gesture or a word of these ladies, which has not been mentioned, day by day, in our Paris papers ? So much so, that I question if the notoriety which attends celebrated artistes on tour, is not more marked than that which falls to their lot if they remain in Paris. If

there is not sufficient copy to be got out of the illustrious tourists' successes, they recoup themselves in describing the incidents of the journey, they even go the length of describing their sleeping-cars, they enumerate the presents with which their cosmopolitan admirers have loaded them. In conclusion, they total the receipts they have brought in, the percentage they have received on the same, and finally, they calculate of what dimensions the houses or palaces will probably be which they will buy on their return ; that's hardly what you can call being forgotten, uncle ; what is your opinion ? ”

Béraudy, in his turn, was silent.

“ And if I allowed you to load me with reproaches just now without answering, it was not because I was in want of arguments to oppose to you,” continued Hector. “ And in the first place, I protest against the provincial prejudices which are so deeply rooted in you, and which hinder you from understanding life as everyone else understands it in our days. The rumours spread abroad about me, and which you only too readily echo, have only had their origin in calumny. People are angry with me for having made a good match with a woman whom I loved, and who, in spite of all that malice has been able to invent against her, has not a fault to reproach herself with : understand, not one ! It is a characteristic of people who are constantly before the public (I ought not to need to remind you of the fact) to excite the jealousy of the envious, and cause them to bespatter them with mud ; but I swear to you that no one would take the risk of repeating to me to my face the infamous calumnies which they spread behind my back.”

He paused for an instant, then, going up to Monsieur Béraudy, his face wearing an expression of the utmost sincerity.

“ Listen, uncle. As long as they only touched myself, I

treated these wretched accusations, I can assure you, with the greatest indifference. My conscience was clear and, strong in this support, I told myself that these stupid statements would die a natural death. I let them go, without sufficiently recalling Beaumarchais's precept, which is only too true: 'Calumniate, calumniate, it will always leave its traces.' I had nothing but contempt and scorn for these silly scandals which reached my ears and disgusted without further affecting me. But now, it's a different matter. You assure me that my sister's future is at stake, that her marriage is on the point of being broken off by reason of this evil notoriety which attaches to my person; that is something which completely changes my attitude, and henceforward I feel as deeply as you that it is time for this farce to cease. I love my Séverine more than you think, more than she herself thinks, that devoted heart which is always ready to sacrifice itself, for I will engage that she bears me no malice for the wrong which I am unintentionally causing her. But from the instant you inform me of what is going on—and for this I thank you—it is my firm intention not to cost her another tear nor sigh, and you can tell her, from me, that before many days are over, her brother will have cleared his name, and that her lover will no longer need to blush to place his hand in that of Hector de Méras's sister."

"And what do you propose to do?" asked Béraudy a little uneasily, and looking into his nephew's eyes to try and read there his determination.

"Give the world an undeniable proof that I am an honourable man," replied Hector.

"How?"

"That is my affair."

"And you will doubtless make still more notorious your name which is already too much so."

"Uncle, no one except myself is a judge of what is best to be done for the honour of the name of De Méras."

"Be it so," said the old man.

He took a few steps towards the door, then, turning round :

"Then you refuse to take your wife abroad?"

"As for that, most decidedly. The time is not yet come."

"Very good, then I shall take Séverine away. We will bury ourselves in the country, and there, perhaps, far away from the theatre and your exploits, I shall succeed in marrying her well."

And leaving the room he murmured :

"Ah ! poor girl, poor girl."

Hardly had he gone than Lueie rushed into the room ; hidden behind a curtain she had heard everything.

"I like the old man," she cried ; "he has a heart full of affection, and how he loves his niece ! I don't see what's to prevent us from going to America, as Jarly offers me five hundred thousand francs for a year's tour?"

"What ! my dear ! five hundred thousand francs isn't enough ! In a year your reputation will have become more firmly established and then Jarly won't get off for under a million !"

CHAPTER XVII.

DE MÉRAS, in an outburst of dignity, had promised his uncle to clear himself in the eyes of the world, but to tell the truth, he announced this intention without the least idea of the means he should employ to accomplish it. This news, brought by Monsieur Béraudy, that his sister's marriage was broken off solely through his fault, had taken him unawares ; he felt all the heavy responsibility of a brother who was standing in the way of his sister's happiness, and he had pledged his word at hazard, leaving the future to determine how he should redeem it.

When Lucie had left him to go and practise at the piano the songs in the next operetta, he stretched himself on one of the sofas in the drawing-room, and remained there more than an hour, absorbed in painful reflection. He was forced to confess to himself that his uncle had only spoken too truly, and that the name of De Méras was deeply compromised. His conscience, whose testimony he had invoked in Monsieur Béraudy's presence, cried aloud to him that this hateful reputation was justified, and his friends knew perfectly his past and present mode of life. If he was still a member of his clubs, if hands were still held out to him on his entry into them, it was because his friends shrunk from the extreme step of expelling him. And then, the favourable reception accorded to the husband was principally owing to the wife ! In certain circles, a man gains prestige from being able to pose as the friend of a fashionable "diva," to

retail the scandal of her private life, report her bon-mots, and profess to have been present at all her suppers and private gatherings. At heart, De Méras was forced to admit that the world despised him. Ah, if someone would only do him the service of repeating aloud in his presence what they whispered in one another's ears, what a splendid opportunity to recover, at the sword's point, his lost honour! This idea haunted his mind with singular persistence, and soon became fixed there.

"I must fight a duel," he repeated every instant, "but with whom?"

For the combat could only absolve him for the past on the condition that his adversary, in the first place, was a man of unimpeachable honour. The much-wished-for excuse for a meeting presented itself at the club the next day, *apropos* of a race which had been run a few days before. The conversation having turned on a French mare which had won a race in England, De Méras maintained, in his usual bantering way, that the animal had been too heavily handicapped.

"It's a miracle," said he, "that she won under such a weight!" And, growing excited, he wound up by stigmatizing all English owners as thieves.

The Marquis of Séphano rose, and with that phlegm which he inherited from his mother, an Englishwoman, declared that Monsieur de Méras talked too disrespectfully of English sportsmen, and that, for his part, he knew many who were perfectly honourable.

"Then you wish to give me the lie, marquis?" replied De Méras.

"Is that what it's called in France?" asked the young attaché, addressing the bystanders.

"No, no, certainly not," interposed a few young men, desirous of putting a stop to the dispute. "Séphano has a

brother-in-law who races, Lord Claghau, and he's standing up for him ; it's only natural."

"I beg pardon," protested Séphano, "I wished to say that all English owners were honourable men. Don't distort the meaning of my words, of which I retract not a single one."

"Very well, then it is I who will give you the lie, and the lie direct, *marquis*," retorted De Méras, coming and planting himself in a provocative attitude in front of Séphano.

"This time I think there's no mistake, gentlemen?" said the latter, calmly taking a card from his pocket-book. And he added, as he handed it to Hector: "Two of my friends shall wait on you."

"Two of mine will be there to receive them," replied De Méras, who, very much excited, his eyes blazing, throwing himself into feigned rage, as if it were a question of a quarrel to the death, was supported by Dorneval and the Prince d'Estrelles.

"There, it's too funny!" said De Mézor. "A Frenchman and a Spaniard fighting about the English!"

Séphano approached two members of the Spanish colony, Rodriguez Alvarès, a chief secretary at the Embassy, and the Duke de Mimèrie, a great landed proprietor of the Estramadura, and begged them to place themselves, on the morrow, at the disposal of Monsieur de Méras's seconds.

As for the latter, who had been conducted into an adjoining room by the group of young men who surrounded him, he had taken the Prince d'Estrelles aside, and entreated him earnestly to give him his support. This choice had been long considered by De Méras; in addition to the fact that the prince belonged to one of the noblest families of La Vendée, and was very rich and very influential amongst the Legitimist party, he had supported Hector in his dispute against the English. D'Estrelles, who was but little inclined to render such a service to a man over whose character there

was so much discussion, sought to excuse himself. He was rather too old to be mixed up in these sort of affairs, and was, moreover, said he, very ignorant about duels, and consequently apt to serve but ill his principal's interests. Many of the other men were more able to fill this office than he, and he instanced at hazard Dorneval, De Mézor, and others. But De Méras persisted.

"Consider that the favour I ask of you, my dear princee, is one of those which are readily accorded to a gallant man," he continued, "and I should take almost as a personal insult a positive refusal on your part."

"Good heavens! without refusing, it is permissible to discuss—"

"And besides, my dear D'Estrelles, rest assured that you will not have any outsider for a companion. I can guarantee that."

"And who will he be, then?"

"You will know to-morrow; I can't mention any name without having first consulted the one interested, but, once again, it will be someone worthy of you."

"Very well, agreed, my dear De Méras, this last argument decides me, unwillingly, I admit, not because of yourself, be it understood, but the talk in which this affair will involve my name terrifies me. I belong to a party, you know, which has but little liking for these affairs, especially when they have not a political reason. However, I repeat my assurance, provide me a solid partner and you can count on me."

"Oh, thanks, princee," cried De Méras, shaking D'Estrelles's hand heartily, "thanks; to-morrow then, early, I shall be with you."

"I shall not go out before mid-day," said the prince, taking leave of De Méras.

D'Estrelles, very much vexed at the adventure, had only accepted from fear of wounding Hector's susceptibilities too

rudely. After all, he had no fault to find with him personally, but he felt himself in a false position, being obliged to give his aid to the husband and, above all, to the former lover of Lucie Guépin. Fortunately he had only given a conditional assent, and in his heart he hoped that De Méras would not succeed in providing himself with a really suitable additional second, in which case he would withdraw.

"Of course," thought he, "he has promised more than he can perform. I'll await to-morrow."

Hector had not exactly done this, as D'E-trelles wished, but he was quite uncertain of the second witness's consent. He for whom he was reserving this unpleasant duty was, in truth, no other than Cardillan, Cardillan the leader of an important political party, the man who had spoken so bitterly of De Méras. The young man had decided on this audacious step on calling to mind a certain story connected with finance which rather compromised Cardillan and Kolbach, and according to which the future minister was supposed to have netted, on the system of half profits with the Alsatian banker, large sums at the expense of the state.

What a triumph, indeed, for De Méras, and, at the same time, what a delicious revenge, to force this proud man, who had dragged him in the mire, to espouse his quarrel. Accordingly, on leaving the club, he sprang gaily into his phaeton, and quickly gathering up the reins, drove full speed from the Mirlitons to Kolbach's house. The financier could not fail to be at home; Hector knew that it was on Monday, the day of his private reception, that the coups which were to be put into execution on the Bourse during the week were planned. When De Méras was announced, the sitting was just coming to an end. Kolbach, much astonished that Lucie's husband should revisit him, after he himself had been requested no more to present himself in the Rue La

Boétie, dismissed his guests hastily, and joined Hector in the room into which a footman had shown him.

"I'm very well," he answered coldly, on De Meras's cordial greeting and warm inquiries as to his health.

"It seems you've a soreness against me still? Why on earth do we never see you now? Upon my word, one might think we'd insulted you. If you've anything to reproach us with, my dear fellow, you must mention it, so that we may know."

"Mention it!" repeated the banker, taken aback by Hector's assurance.

"Undoubtedly! You haven't been insulted unbeknown to me, I suppose? The servants are often so impertinent. But you mustn't blame us for that."

Kolbach opened his eyes, endeavouring to understand. At any rate, the couple could not be in need of money, for he knew on good authority that Hector's outstanding debts had been quite recently paid by Lucie.

"Oh," replied he, after an instant, with perfect calmness, "give it whatever name you like; for my part, I was simply turned out of your house."

"I assure you, notwithstanding, that neither myself nor Lucie ever gave such an order. In proof of which," pursued Hector, without giving Kolbach time to speak, "in proof of which, Lucie often talks to me about you. She appears to regret you, my dear fellow, and if I hadn't that confiding character that you know me to possess, upon my word, I should be jealous!"

"Of me?" cried the old man, whose face beamed with delight.

"Yes, yes, of you!" replied De Méras. "People say you've a way of cajoling the women."

"Oh! my dear fellow!" said Kolbach modestly.

"Well, dangerous or not, Lucie asks for you back, and

I'm come to fetch you. It's just my way. When I saw lights in your windows, as I passed, 'pon my word, I stopped and came up, resolved to carry you off. You will have supper with us, at the side of your little friend Lucie, who knows nothing about it. What an agreeable surprise it will be for her !”

Kolbach could not resist a supper which was to be graced by a woman's presence. In an instant he had forgotten all his resentment, and he stood before Hector, his hat on his head, his overcoat buttoned, upright, almost young, ready to follow him. Lucie was, in truth, very much astonished, on leaving the theatre, to meet Kolbach leaning on her husband's arm.

“Kolbach !” she cried.

“The same,” interposed Hector. “He's going to give us the pleasure of supping with us. Don't you think he has taken long enough to make up his mind ? Confess that he's a queer character ?”

“That's true,” said Lucie, in reply to her husband's question.

“And do you know the reasons he sets out to explain his absence ? He says that you or I, both of us, perhaps, forbade him our house ! It's enough to kill anyone with laughing.”

“Oh, Kolbach !” said Lucie, reproachfully, “you could think, you—?”

She knew nothing beyond that De Méras had some hidden interest in making his peace with the old banker. Moreover, personally, she retained only pleasant recollections of the Alsatian. The table was always laid at midnight, against Lucie's return ; orders were given to prepare for another guest, and bring up a few bottles of Clos-Vougeot. Lucie, who sat between her husband and Kolbach, paid particular attention to the latter, being encouraged therein

by signals from Hector. It was only after Kolbach had swallowed a good many glasses of Clos-Vougeot that Hector broached the subject of his future second's financial dabblings.

"You still do business with Cardillan?" he asked.

"Not much, not much," replied the Alsatian, his eyes glistening as they lighted on Lucie, who recalled so many tender memories.

"He has done you some good turns, for all that, and not long since, either?"

"You're speaking of the Tonkin loan?"

"Just so."

"Ah, yes, there have been some queer tales on that subject, about Cardillan."

"I never quite understood the arrangement; though I have had it explained—"

"I'll tell you the particulars, willingly; no one knows them better than myself; but keep it dark! It won't go any further, will it? for there are great interests involved—"

"I'll be as dumb as—" He did not finish the sentence.

Kolbach, perfectly intoxicated, laughed between every word, and his little eyes twinkled above his flushed cheeks.

"After all, I can laugh at what people say, now," said he; "I tricked the lot of them! The money's safe, and the game's over."

And as he had a spite against Cardillan, he described to De Méras in his own way how the affair had been conducted.

According to him, a certain Kian-Tcheou, a wealthy merchant at Saïgon, had suggested the idea to Cardillan, a simple enough idea, after all, which consisted in depreciating as much as possible, so as to reduce, so to speak, to the value of the paper they were printed on, the debentures of the Tonkin debt, and afterwards to buy them in a lump for an insignificant sum. As the emperor of the country would

most probably never have at his disposal the millions necessary for their repayment, the two plotters would induce the French government to interfere in Tonkin, a very rich colony to exploit, at the north of French Cochin-China, and the tributary kingdom of Annam, and to take over, on its own account, the payment of the debentures which would be converted into three per cents. Kian-Tcheou and Cardillan would then only have to exchange their heap of paper against dividend-warrants, to the value of one hundred to one hundred and fifty millions, the money for which would naturally be provided by French tax-payers. It was clear and simple, but not sufficiently so for the public even to have an inkling of what was going on.

Cardillan had acquiesced at once, but as he had no money at the moment when this tempting proposition had been submitted to him, he had seen that a banker was indispensable to bring the affair to a successful conclusion. Kolbach had made his appearance at this stage. He had been sounded first of all, and no obstacle having been encountered either in his conscience or his scruples, he had been enlightened at once, and had furnished the funds, but on the condition that he should finally recover the whole of the capital laid out, plus half the profits. It was but a few days after the signing of the agreement between Kian-Tcheou, Cardillan, and Kolbach, that, on the motion of the minister of war, an old general, nicknamed in the army "His Excellency The Ass's Skin" the Chamber of deputies had voted large credits for the Tonkin Expedition, The debate had been stormy, in the committees at first, and then in the tribune, but Cardillan had spoken three times and supported energetically the government proposals ; and this was sufficient to convince the majority. Thirty thousand men had soon embarked in the State transports for Cochin-China and commenced that deplorable expedition which had

cost France so many soldiers, killed more by disease than by the enemy's bullets, and which ended in a protectorate more ruinous than profitable. As for the conversion of the foreign debentures into three per cents, it had taken place, as those interested had wished, without scandal, under the specious appearance of a patriotic act and of a clever financial combination which established to the furthest corners of the East the credit of France. "And that is how, at the same time as France established her protectorate over Tonkin, I accorded mine to the pretty actresses of Paris," concluded the banker. In spite of the bumpers of Clos-Vougeot, De Méras had maintained all his sang-froid. Familiar now with everything which it was important for him to know, he ordered coffee and liqueurs and packed Kolbach off as quickly as possible. A quarter of an hour afterwards, he was helping him to drag himself to the front steps, from which he hoisted him into a cab, giving orders to the driver to hand him over to his porter, for he was not in a fit state to get up to his room alone.

De Méras went to bed without confiding any of his plans to Lucie. He was some little time before he went to sleep, reflecting for the first time since the afternoon that his life might be in danger; and in truth, had not the Marquis Séphano the reputation of being an excellent duellist? The next morning he rose early and hurried to the fencing-school to try a few passes with the instructor. This test had a salutary effect on his nerves. He left there, satisfied with himself, having proved once more that his hand had not lost its cunning, being as prompt in attack as defence, and still possessing the same wrist of iron which was the despair of his adversaries.

At nine o'clock he was at Cardillan's house. He represented himself as a friend of Mousieur Kolbach, a name which he thought should surely be the "Open Sesame" at the door

of the future minister. And in truth, a few seconds after, the footman reappeared, begging him to wait until Monsieur Cardillan was dressed.

Cardillan had never met De Méras, so when he stood before him he was constrained to ask him to whom had he the honour of speaking.

"To Monsieur de Méras," replied Hector simply.

"Monsieur de Méras?" repeated Cardillan. "Did you not tell my servant that you came from Kolbach?"

"I certainly did say so, sir, being uncertain whether the name of De Méras would suffice me to obtain an audience of you, but having no doubt that that of Kolbach would find you readily accessible." And he added: "There are so many points of sympathy between banking and politics." The tone in which this last phrase had been pronounced sounded rather ironical to Cardillan; but on casting his eyes on De Méras he became convinced that the latter's attitude was simply cordial. He pointed to a chair, and took a seat himself, in readiness to listen.

"Upon my word, sir, the step which I am taking will probably seem to you bold on the part of a man who is a total stranger to you; it is, nevertheless, one which is permissible between people who are well educated and almost connected through the company which they keep, and I hope you see in it nothing but what is flattering to you as an honourable man."

"I have no doubt of it, sir," replied the deputy in a tone which showed little conviction, but which essayed to be polite.

"You will be able to judge of that immediately, for the service I am about to claim of you concerns my own honour."

"I don't understand you," said Cardillan quickly, fearing that he was beginning to understand but too well.

"Oh, it's a most simple matter; a dispute arises at the

club, the lie is given, and consequently cards are exchanged; this sort of adventure is common enough in our circle. But what is more unusual is the position in which my marriage with an operetta star has placed me, and which forces me to have at my disposal in this affair seconds of incontestable moral standing; I imagined that you would be willing to be one of these seconds, and that is the reason why I am now standing before you."

Cardillan felt very much embarrassed. "But, sir, this description of service is generally rendered by an intimate friend, and circumstances not having hitherto thrown us in one another's way—"

"I foresaw your hesitation," interposed De Méras, still very correct; "but a few more explanations, and I hope I shall have overcome it."

Then, in a few words, he related the cause of his quarrel with the Marquis of Séphano; mentioned—purposely laying stress on their names—his adversary's seconds, and was careful to reserve until the last that of the Prince d'Estrelles, who, said he, was very proud to second him on this occasion.

The name of the Prince d'Estrelles, associated in a challenge with that of De Méras, softened the expression of Cardillan's face a trifle, for a moment before he had been on the point of formally refusing his visitor's request. The fact was, the Prince d'Estrelles was one of those men with whom one is anxious to be in sympathy, even when he is amongst one's opponents. And who could tell? Possibly this affair, due solely to hazard, would result in the reconciliation of two political parties? Thus, this prospect of discussing for several hours on neutral ground a question in which the prince and he defended the same interests, was very attractive to Cardillan. But De Méras was mixed up in it, a fact which spoilt everything. And the deputy repeated to himself the remarks he had made to Lobel

about this shady libertine, this supposed husband of a Parisian actress.

"I much regret, sir, but my political position, my party — In one word, it is perfectly impossible for me to have my name mixed up in an affair of this kind."

"Perhaps," returned De Méras quickly, and with a smile on his face, "it is the noise which has been made about *my* name which prompts this answer? But consider how few people are safe from foolish scandal, and without wishing to repeat rumours about me—for the most part pure fabrications—can you prevent the world from gossiping and the press from libelling? Suppose a paper takes for its text to-morrow the Tonkin expedition, and more particularly those who advised it. Would you be able to prevent it from giving its own version of the matter, from saying, for instance, how the fall in Tonkin debentures was arranged, what gave rise to their being bought in a lump and converted into three per cents? Could you forbid it from relating how, in order to attain this result, a murderous war was undertaken in a deadly climate, which lost France so many thousands of men, and so many millions fruitlessly squandered? And this," pursued De Méras, "under pretext of unmasking the guilty parties, of setting up the mournful comparison between these heaps of slain buried out of sight on the one side in the sands of Tonkin, and of the heaps of gold pocketed on the other by an Alsatian banker and a French deputy."

"Sir!" cried Cardillan, wincing at being accused of such infamy.

"Oh, rest assured this will not be made public, for we are all honourable men and should unanimously oppose it. I simply wished to prove to you the extent to which men's characters are maligned, and I would engage, now, that you perfectly agree with me."

De Mèras had said enough to show the future minister how much the possessor of such a story was to be feared.

For a moment Cardillan was on the point of kicking Hector out of the house, but he was afraid of a man possessing so few scruples as Lucie Guépin's husband ; so he thought it prudent not even to attempt to refute his questioner's insinuations and to yield without disputing them.

"What time is the Prince d'Estrelles to be with you?" he asked.

"At eleven o'clock," replied Hector, with a smile on his lips.

"Very well, then, I'll meet him there," concluded the deputy, holding out his hand to his principal.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON the day but one after, one might have read in all the morning papers, "Yesterday, the twenty-fifth—1882, a duel was fought on the Belgian frontier, between the Marquis Séphano, attaché at the Spanish Embassy, and Monsieur de Méras. Swords were chosen as the weapons. The first pass lasted four and a half minutes and was without result. After an interval of a few moments the duel was resumed the word having been given by the seconds. The Marquis Séphano having then been wounded in the fore-arm, and the doctor who was on the spot having stated that it was sufficient to give his adversary an advantage, the seconds declared that honour was satisfied. On the strength of which they signed their names : " (then followed the seconds' names)—" the Duke de Mimério and Rodriguez Alvarès for the Marquis Séphano ; Prince d'Estrelles and Cardillan for De Méras."

A few papers gave the news without comment ; the greater number dwelt on the courage of De Méras, the husband of the star dear to Parisians, who had not hesitated to pit himself against the Marquis Séphano, reputed to be one of the best swordsmen in Spain. And, moreover, all, even those who were ignorant of the cause of the duel, agreed on this point, that the envied husband of Mademoiselle Guépin was greatly esteemed in Parisian society, since he had had as adversary one of the most illustrious descendants of the Castilian nobility and as seconds, the

last of the Vendéans and the first of republicans. Duelling has such a firm hold in France that not one paper found fault with Cardillan, future minister though he was, for having supported De Méras.

Five or six days after the duel Séphano reappeared at the club, and De Méras, who had sent every day to inquire after the wounded man, was the first to hold out his hand which the marquis frankly took.

"What folly it is, after all," said Hector, shaking the unwounded hand, "and I admit, now that I am calm, that it was I who was in the wrong."

The last act of this little drama was played in one of the rooms of a fashionable restaurant, where a sumptuous supper had gathered together the two champions and their most intimate friends; oceans of champagne were drunk to the hatred which every sensible man should entertain for duelling, a fact which did not hinder two or three meetings from being mooted at dessert, and which were only prevented from going further, thanks to the conciliatory spirit of a few of the party. The De Méras-Séphano affair had been more noticed by the public, in that it not only resulted in renovating the honour of Hector's name, but was almost the sole cause of the fusion of two important groups in the Chamber. As a matter of fact, Cardillan, to whom his principal's interests were quite of secondary importance, had usefully employed the journey of seven or eight hours between Paris and Belgium.

Seated in a first-class compartment side by side with the Prince d'Estrelles, and facing Rodriguez Alvarès and the Duke de Mimério, he had not ceased to talk politics with his neighbour, and the interview had gradually taken the importance of a consultation in the Palais Bourbon. Public worship, inviolability of the magistracy, compulsory education, foreign treaties, home and foreign politics, all had

passed through the ordeal of a close, full, and almost cordial discussion, which, in contra-distinction to ordinary discussions, had ended in absolute agreement on certain points. Cardillan and the Prince d'Estrelles had two common enemies, radicalism and socialism, and they were always certain of finding one another united on this field of battle and both equally eager for the fray. So the papers were full of nothing but this alliance so happily concluded, which gave Cardillan fifty or sixty additional votes in the Chamber and Senate on most of the questions of the day, and which hastened on more than ever the formation of the new ministry.

Lobel had not come again to see his chief. He passed whole days a prey to the most intense grief, lying on a sofa and turning over, one after the other, the books in his library, not one of which succeeded in interesting him. He surprised himself frequently with his eyes fixed on a Japanese vase, with grotesque porcelain bas-reliefs, fantastic handles, deliciously hideous heads ; or else, his head resting on a cushion covered with coarse Persian embroidered work, he stared stupidly in the air at the irregular circles made by the cigar which he feverishly chewed, like a child who is cutting its teeth bites at the coral which the nurse has hung round its neck. Life appeared colourless and insipid to him, through this bluish cloud, which darkened with gloomy shadows all the vain occupations of which it was made up. He did not actually accuse Cardillan of his misfortune, and in his lucid moments he went so far as to recognize that society was perfectly right in rejecting as unworthy any shady character, but he felt irritated that the innocent, such as Séverine and himself, should be the victims of this strict purging.

It was in the midst of these mournful reflections, this sickly disgust, that the news of De Méras's duel had surprised

him. By chance one morning as he opened his paper mechanically, the name of De Méras, that name which always caused his heart to vibrate, caught his eye somewhere on the sheet. "De Méras on the first page!" said he to himself. "What new disgrace has he been perpetrating?"

His eyes soon fell on the report of the wounding of Séphano; there was nothing very extraordinary in that, but what was his surprise on seeing the names of the Prince d'Estrelles and Cardillan among the seconds! Cardillan! Why, he had no relation of that name with the exception of a little cousin, an orphan, hardly seventeen years old. There was no doubt it was the deputy Cardillan, the man of the hour, the leader of the majority! He, De Méras's second! Lobel thought he must be wandering. One of two things had happened; either for the last three days he had been in a violent fever which had confused his brain, or this paper was lying, and unwarrantably making use of an honoured name which it hoped to bracket with impunity with that of an outcast from society. And he recalled Cardillan's lively indignation against De Méras, and that flood of scornful epithets which he had heaped on Séverine's brother. "A favoured individual, who was too much in the ladies' debt! A husband who had elevated complacency to the dignity of an institution! A wretch who had squandered his last sixpence and who needed a rope to drag him on to his feet again!" And twenty other more or less fanciful definitions.

He rose abruptly, dressed, and rushed off to Cardillan's.

The latter, his face all smiles, full of hopes of the consequences of his journey to the frontier, was at his desk, reading the account of the last evening's sitting.

"Ah, here you are at last!" cried Cardillan, "I was going to write to you, for there's something fresh, my dear friend. One of the enemy's columns has come to terms, and we

shall be obliged to change our tactics. So I must consult you."

Armand, paper in hand, walked up to the desk.

"Is this your name at the foot of this account?" he asked in a trembling voice. Cardillan, rather taken aback by the singular behaviour of his secretary, did not know at first what answer to make.

"Certainly," said he, after a moment.

"What! after what you told me about this Monsieur De Méras, after your formal opposition to my marriage with Séverine, after the violent diatribe on the self-respect indispensable to prominent politicians, it is you, you, Cardillan, who have lowered yourself to mix thus with that man, you who signed the account of the duel!"

"Well?" asked Cardillan in a bantering voice, as if to say: "Isn't it a master-stroke?"

"Didn't your whole being revolt at the moment of putting your name at the foot of this paper? Didn't your hand tremble?"

"This is too much!" cried Cardillan, becoming really angry. "I assist in a serious affair, the brother of the girl he loves. I re-establish this brother's good name, and it is the one interested, the lover of this Séverine—whom I alone could render marriageable—who permits himself to reproach me with my conduct."

"Ah, don't you think I've read between the lines? Do you think I needed to be present at the interview which must have taken place between you and Guépin's husband, to appreciate your determination? If De Méras obtained your consent to be his second, it is plainly because he held you in his power by some means of which I have no suspicion, and which I don't want to know; but of a surety, it was neither the unexpected alliance with the Prince d'Estrelles, nor the interests of a secretary, whose love affairs

are nothing to you, which influenced you! And to think that I have believed in this man for so long!" concluded Lobel, eyeing the deputy contemptuously.

Cardillan, rather intimidated by Lobel's insinuations, was silent, not knowing how to explain the strange inconsistency of his conduct. "Well, what are you driving at?" he asked, embarrassed at his own silence.

"At this," replied Lobel. "Eleven years ago, when I entered your service, I had aims which I thought were equally pursued by you—to render services to my fellow-citizens with all the strength which my poor abilities gave me, to plead the cause of the many against the few, to point out all which to me, in my opinion of an honest man, seemed improper or iniquitous, and above all never to lose my own self-respect. To-day I am forced to admit with pain the impotence of integrity in politics. We are condemned to perpetual compromises, concessions and falsehoods. It is a constant sacrifice of principles, obliging us to-day to make terms with our enemies, to-morrow to oppose them; to say white in the morning and black at night; to declare criminal to-morrow what we had pronounced to be righteous to-day, and we shall arrive at the end of our career, having presented our country with common-place laws and incoherent reforms, having replaced an imperfect government by an infirm one, having created new evils in the place of old ones, and that from cowardice, from fear of compromising ourselves, from moral dastardliness. Cleverness, say you? Be it so; but cleverness which is repugnant to me and for which I have no aptitude."

"Then you are leaving me abruptly, and for no reason—for a trifle?"

"A trifle!" repeated Lobel, catching at the expression. "On the part of any other than the man with whom I have worked so long, I should call it treason."

Cardillan had risen, his hands in his pockets, playing awkwardly with a bunch of keys, feeling sheepish in the presence of this honest man, who was at the same time a man of talent, whose co-operation he valued much more for the services which he hoped from him than for those he had received. "So," said he, "this is all which those ten years of work together have inspired you with, years during which I have always shown myself your friend and elevated you, I may say, to my own level, in which I did not undertake a task unshared by you, in which I did not deliver a speech which we had not prepared together? And you set up to be an honourable man. Why, you have descended to the depths of ingratitude, do you hear? Ah, I tell you plainly, Monsieur Armand Lobel, if I had been in your place, I would have bandaged my eyes rather than have taken the liberty of judging the actions of my benefactor."

"Enough, sir," replied Lobel, "I shall quit the life, not for the sake of embarrassing you, but from disgust at politics."

He left the room, bowing distantly. His position was henceforth lost, and perhaps, too, that happy future of which he had dreamed with Mademoiselle de Méras. Hector, in the eyes of the world, was reinstated by the duel, but Armand had no more than four or five thousand francs a year, and it was he now who was an impossible match for Séverine. So he owed it to himself to have on the spot a full explanation with his betrothed in order to release her from her engagement, and he betook himself immediately to the Rue de l'Arcade.

Monsieur Béraudy was from home. Armand was going away, not asking to see her whom his visit concerned, when Séverine, having recognized his voice from a neighbouring room, rushed out into the hall and begged him to come in; her uncle was expected back at every moment. The young man

hesitated at first, then, on a sign of entreaty from Mademoiselle de Méras, he entered the room.

The sight of those two great despairing eyes, red and swollen, had rent his heart. Séverine was perhaps prettier thus, if it were possible, with her face of waxen paleness ; but how she must have suffered, poor child, and what sleepless hours she must have passed to alter so markedly all her features ! Hardly had she led Armand into the drawing-room, than a sob rose in her throat, and she turned away quickly to hide her tears ; but Armand saw all her poor body shaken with convulsive starts which communicated themselves to him.

“ Well ? ” said she, turning round after a few moments, and forcing a smile ; “ you haven’t a word for me ? ”

“ What can I say ? ” replied he, holding out his hand.

Oh, the delicious clasp, and how their hearts glowed during the few seconds it lasted ! It was from an instinctive feeling of modesty that Séverine drew her hand away, sensible that her cheeks were becoming scarlet beneath the emotion of a too lively joy.

“ The truth, Armand, the truth, I entreat you, for this uncertainty is killing me,” she cried. And in a voice in which one could perceive all the joy or grief which she awaited from her lover’s answer : “ Our marriage is not only postponed, it is impossible, is it not ? ”

Lobel hesitated.

“ Ah, you would have already said no, if you had the least hope remaining.”

She sank suddenly into an arm-chair, dazed, but no longer crying.

“ It’s all over now—I know everything, and I shall be strong.”

Her poor dear head hung lifeless. Armand, for his part, was enduring agonies.

“ Oh, this is terrible ! ” he murmured.

"And why has it become impossible?" asked Mademoiselle de Méras, in whom a rebellious feeling was beginning to assert itself. "Why? Am I not marriageable? What difference do my surroundings make? Is not my own life all that it ought to be? Have I committed a grievous fault unbeknown to myself? What wrong have I done? Let me be told, that at least I may know it. Ah, heavens! no one loves me, that is the real truth." She found consolation in this torrent of words which seemed an outlet for her poignant grief.

"Séverine, Séverine, you are unjust towards me who am suffering equally with you."

"But why, then? Tell me why?" continued the young girl in a ringing voice.

"Permit me, in our common interest, not to obey you."

"No, on the contrary, I will know all. Ah! in my present state I can well hear all."

"Very well; it is neither you nor the others who are to blame. Henceforth anyone will be ready to enter your family, for in the eyes of the world your name is stainless. But who will ever have an idea of what your brother's reinstatement has cost me, me?" He stopped.

"You? I don't understand."

"Why should you? It is enough that you should know that I have put myself out of court in giving up my position."

"Under what circumstances, for what reasons?" she asked feverishly.

They had risen, and once more their hands met.

Then Armand told her all, Cardillan's refusal to consent to his marriage with her, and the duel which had followed a few days after this refusal, a duel in which Cardillan had lent his support to De Méras whose honour he had disputed a few hours before. He described to her the disgust which had arisen in him at forming one in this political world in

which each act entailed a sacrifice of principles, and in which an indispensable veneer of honesty concealed the greatest unscrupulousness and even baseness at times. He laughed as he thought of the abuse which was made in the speeches, in the Chamber and in the papers, of this political conscience which was disgraced at every instant for the sake of interested friendship, and of which the sole object, the sole motive power was the hope of obtaining within the shortest possible time the salary of a minister, ambassador, prefect, or other richly remunerated office. Well, he had had enough of it by this time, and he had left them all, Cardillac with the rest. She had asked him for the truth and he had told her it. It only remained for them once more to clasp one another's hands, like friends who were to meet no more, and to pursue their respective destinies, since henceforth it was impossible to go through life together.

"And it is he who talks to me thus?" cried Séverine, placing herself deliberately in front of the door to prevent him from passing, "and he nearly killed me just now by telling me that we could no longer be for one another! And he would go as he threatens, were I to fall dead from grief on the floor! And all this because he has been honourable, delicate, honest, disinterested! Why, wretches exist who do one no more injury than he!"

"Séverine!"

"And he professes to love me!"

"Ah! truly I love you!"

"There!" cried she, throwing herself on the young man's neck, and clasping him in her arms, "one word from your heart—I was only waiting for that!" She cried and laughed at the same time. "What difference do all your reasonings make to me? Was it then so difficult to say to me when you came in: 'My dear Séverine, you loved a gentleman who could offer you twenty thousand francs a year; he has

no longer but five thousand, will it make any difference ? That would have been an affair of a few words, and Made-moiselle de Méras would immediately have answered : ‘ My dear Armand, the man of whom you speak can approach me boldly, for with twenty thousand francs a year one can be happy with but a little love, whilst with five thousand there will be need of much ; I shall make up the difference.’ ”

The door opened.

“ Ah, uncle, uncle ! I knew someone’s kiss was wanting ! ” cried Séverine, running up to the old man.

“ You’ve come to an understanding without my interference, from what I can see.”

“ That is to say,” replied Séverine, recovering now all her gaiety of the happy days, “ that I’ve taken pity on this poor fellow who’s out of work, and that I’m going to give him something to do.”

“ I engage that she has found you a fixed berth,” said Béraudy, laughing.

“ You’ve guessed right, uncle,” returned the young girl.

On returning home, full of Séverine, and already thinking over the preparations for the coming marriage, Armand found Madame Béchart installed there. Juliette ran and threw herself weeping on his breast. Ah ! it was horrible, inhuman, his conduct to her ! He had not the right thus to desert a woman whom he could only reproach with loving him too much. She guessed all now—he was going to be married, and that was why he avoided her, she who would have been ready to sacrifice all for his sake. For he could boast of having been adored as never man was ! She took his hands, which she covered with kisses, nestling against him, as if to make sure that he was really there, and that for the moment at least he would not escape her. Did she make him so unhappy, then, that he was anxious to have done with her ? She had hardly had time to enjoy his love and

he was leaving her all panting with unassuaged passion, to run after yonder little thing, with whom Armand would pass a monotonous, wearisome, prosaic life, without ever feeling one of those powerful emotions which only a real woman, a real mistress like Juliette, was capable of provoking. It was a cry of "Swear to me that you won't go back to her. Write and tell her that you mistook your feelings towards her, and that you would make her unhappy. Say—ah! say anything you like, it's all one to me. For your sake I would consent to compromise my virtue and my good name, for I have given myself to you, and can bear anything except your indifference."

Lobel, much embarrassed, and still upset by the scene he had just had with Séverine, did not know how to make this tearful woman understand that he did not love her, and had never done so. It was distasteful to him, in the presence of this grief which appeared to be genuine, to accuse Juliette's brother-in-law of having thrown her into his arms, without that he, Armand, was in the least degree inclined to receive her. Chance, or Béchart's complacency, had brought about a connection which force of habit alone had sustained, and it was perhaps this coldness in his relations with Juliette which had provoked in her, by the simple law of contrast, this exaggerated development of passion. Nevertheless, he felt that he was in a very awkward, a very false position, and was especially anxious that visits such as these should not be repeated, now that his marriage was settled; so he informed Madame Béchart that his determination was unchangeable. And surely she must understand that their love could not continue, could have no outcome, and besides, time would soon heal their wounds. And a thousand other reasons, good or bad, which he gave at hazard as they came into his mind.

As he might have expected, Juliette went into hysterics.

She uttered piercing cries, swore that she should die of despair, and finally left him, with the assurance that, if before two days had passed he had not returned to her, she would have had an interview with Mademoiselle de Méras. All night long Armand did not sleep, racking his brain to discover some means of sparing Séverine an interview as painful as ridiculous, inventing a hundred plans which an instant afterwards he saw to be impracticable, cursing the unlucky day when he had allowed himself to be captivated by the handsome Juliette's rather mature charms.

As he was getting up next morning, without having come to any determination, a letter in an unknown hand was brought up to him. He opened it, and saw that it was signed by Béchart.

"Is he writing to intercede with me on behalf of his sister-in-law?"

The letter was in these terms :

"SIR,—I hear from various sources that your frequent visits to my house, having for cause Madame Juliette Béchart, have been the subject of remark. I will allow no one, whoever he may be, to compromise the virtuous woman who is my sister-in-law, and I ask you, in consequence, to spare us your visits in the future.

Yours faithfully."

"Come," thought Lobel, "Béchart is certainly worth more than his reputation."

A month after Armand married Séverine.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE very day after Juliette had wept so in Armand's arms, Béchart, on unfolding his paper, had at once come across the following editorial remark :—

“ By reason of a dispute, wholly political, by-the-bye, which arose between Monsieur Cardillan and his secretary and friend, Monsieur Armand Lobel, the latter is reported to have intimated to the leader of the Left that he must no longer count on his services. We regret this determination of the young and already famous secretary, whom his tried talent destined in the near future to a high position.”

“ What ! he is deserting ! ” cried Béchart, reading again the passage about Lobel ; “ and I who reckoned on him for my nomination to a chief-secretaryship.” He handed the paper to his wife.

“ Well ? ” said she, after having read it with trembling eyes and a slight shudder of her whole body.

“ Well, don't you understand ? It's plain enough, at any rate,” he replied.

“ Papers are often misinformed.”

“ Misinformed, the ‘ French Standard ! ’ Come, come, it's Cardillan's organ.” Then he added, crushing the paper in his rage : “ My dear, your visit is useless now.”

“ Do you insist that I should finally break with Monsieur Armand ? ” she asked, very anxiously.

“ That's understood.”

"Oh, don't imagine I shall obey you!"

"But remember our agreement!" cried Béchart, his eyes glaring terribly. "From the moment when one of our friends becomes useless to us, he must be deprived of our friendship, of yours, I should say."

She scanned him with a look of disgust. "What sort of man, then, are you?" she cried.

"Whose fault is it?" he replied, calmly. "Did I counsel your first deceit? It was quite unbeknown to me, you must confess, that you were the mistress of my chief, when a little note—you remember?—'your Charles who adores you'—fell into my hands and informed me of your unfaithfulness? I forgave you, but claimed damages and interest. What could be more just? It was agreed between us that I should choose your lovers, and dismiss them, at will. Well, the agreement is still in force and you must conform to it. Confess that it has been very useful to us, this little agreement against which you are rebelling now. In the first place, it has allowed you to satisfy more than one fancy, amorous darling that you are, and without it we should be in misery still. By Dumasset, the successor of 'Charles who adores you,' I was nominated principal clerk at four thousand francs. Larget, who took his place, made me an under-secretary, and to Dorneval I owe the ribbon of a chevalier of the Legion of Honour. From Monsieur Lobel I expected my promotion to a chief-secretaryship. He is giving up politics, he therefore becomes useless to me, and so I strike him off the list. Get another one, and say no more about it."

"And supposing I were to take it into my head to inform the world that Irma is my daughter and that you are my husband?"

"Do so if you dare; go and tell the indifferent, and especially those whom you still hope to seduce by your

rather fading charms, that you've been married twenty-two years and have a daughter of age."

"Ah, sir, you are relentless!" She foamed at the mouth. Then suddenly overcoming her rage, and throwing herself at her husband's feet: "I entreat you! If you only knew how I love him! Give me a little longer; leave me Armand!"

"No!"

Then she rose in arms. "Scoundrel! scoundrel! scoundrel!" she cried. "Why, you're worse than the man who lives publicly on his mistress and beats her when she does not bring him money. All the respect, all the honour with which you are surrounded are made up only of filth and shame. Why, I'm worth more, with all my lovers, than you with your red ribbon and your spurious honour. But I defy you, and I'll stick to Lobel, and you won't dare to take him away from me."

"We'll see about that!" said Béchart, and he stretched out his hand to ring the bell for the servant.

"Very well, let's have no scandal! Let it be so, I'll leave him. For the rest, he's going to be married," she continued, suddenly appeased, "and wouldn't have had anything more to do with me. But then, whom shall I love now? or, rather, who will love me? For after all, in spite of his quarrel with Cardillan, he would no doubt have been useful to you. Well, you won't allow it, will you? And yet, are you sure that anyone else will find me agreeable?"

She threw mechanically a covert glance on the mirror, busying herself in smoothing her disordered hair, as if to make certain that she was still attractive.

Béchart reflected; he thought of the duel which had taken place two days before, and through which had arisen, as the papers had not failed to insist, the new friendship between De Méras and Cardillan.

"My dear," said he all at once, "if you were reasonable, you would not hanker for long after your Lobel. It's plain he loves you no longer. I knew it and said nothing to you about it, for fear of paining you; but it would have been doing you a very poor service now to leave you in blissful ignorance. Give up this caprice, then, the more especially as I know a charming fellow who will soon have made you forget it."

"I doubt it," she replied, sadly. Then, in an indifferent tone:

"And who is this charming fellow?"

"De Méras."

"He—and Lucie?"

"Lucie! Good! She's too much infatuated with her Blaizinot to be jealous of her husband. But if Hector's not much in favour with his wife, he's infinitely so with Cardillan, and it is on him I count to become chief secretary before long."

And declining to listen to Juliette's remarks, he had written Armand Lobel the letter in which he informed him of his dismissal. It was certainly rather presumptuous thus to fix at hazard on Hector without previous investigation, especially as for the last few months a certain coolness had existed between the Bécharts and the De Mérases. But the wretch had surmounted other and much more arduous difficulties. He went out and drove to Lucie's.

"I suppose I must come to you!" cried he, as soon as he saw the young woman in the distance. "Fie! the naughty, little, careless girl who neglects her best friends!"

"So it is you who are complaining?"

"Certainly, we never see you now."

"And you're not bringing your daughter Irma to reproach me too?"

"My daughter Irma?" Béchart could not understand.

"The deuce! you're not very well acquainted with your family affairs. So much the better for you, after all. Does she still live beneath the paternal roof, your daughter?"

"Certainly! But why all these questions about Irma? Have you had a quarrel?"

"Rather, my boy! And there's not much fear that she'll ever venture to come here again, because she knows well I should cure her of the sin of idleness. I'd give the slut a claving!" And delivering imaginary blows with the back of her little nervous hand, as if she was furiously boxing someone's ears: "Gee up! gee up!" she cried, as if to urge herself to hit harder. Then, suddenly falling into a chair, still flushed from her exertions: "Ah, there, you're her father, I'd best tell you all," said she.

Then she gave him a detailed account of the loves of Blaiziot and Irma. Had ever anyone seen such a thing! That monkey Blaiziot who had been temporarily smitten with the youngster's mug! Every evening he would go and sit in her music-hall and be ready to die away with ecstacy at her songs, as he drunk his beer; he had sent her bouquets bought with money he had had from her, Lucie! If it wasn't enough to drive one mad?"

"Irma, Blaiziot's mistress!" repeated Béchart, taking his head between his hands with a gesture of despair. "I'll kill her, the little slut, I'll kill her!" He had buried his head in the cushions of the divan and was sobbing in a most heart-rending way. All at once he sprang up. "No," cried he, "she has been slandered; she's not guilty! It's not possible, not possible, a Béchart!"

Not possible! But when she was telling him that this girl was good for nothing! Had not Lucie surprised them together, there, in her house? She would show him the sofa if he liked. And besides, that wasn't all. Irma was

beginning to get stout, and that in no mean degree. Yes, she was nothing more nor less than enceinte !

“ Irma, enceinte ! ”

Yes, yes, enceinte, and pretty far gone too. But as for knowing by whom, that was quite another thing. And that great fool Blaiziot who really thought he was the only one. What about the scene-shifter, what about the prompter ? Didn't they count ?

“ But you know,” she concluded, with the same feverish volubility, “ I advise her never to cross my path, or I'd turn her up and administer correction on that side of her body where she isn't getting stout.”

And dealing backhanded blows into space, as she had done a few minutes before :

“ Gee up ! gee up ! ” she shouted.

“ Have no fear, you won't meet her any more,” said Béchart.

“ What are you going to do with her ? ”

“ I shall send her away into the country, no matter where, so long as I do not have the disgrace of seeing her confined in Paris. If her misconduct scandalises you, judge how it disgusts me, me, a servant of the state, a chevalier of the Legion of Honour ! It wasn't enough to have a girl come out at a music-hall ; she must be debauched and her dishonour be on the point of being made public. That she should have a lover, one could get over that, but to have a child. He was fit to choke with exasperation at the thought that Juliette would become a grandmother. A grandmother ! that is to say that she would have to give up all hopes of lovers, and he of posts and honours.

“ Poor man,” murmured Lucie, her heart melting at the unhappy father's grief.

“ And then, after what has taken place,” he asked almost humbly, “ your doors are closed against us ? ”

“By no means ; I only bar the youngster, a slut that you’re quite right in sending away. But you and your sister-in-law, you must come often, on the contrary, and to-morrow I shall expect you to breakfast. It’ll be a change for Hector who gets bored, and he likes you both.”

The next day, at table, Lucie was mightily amused at the overtures which Juliette, inaugurating the project conceived by Béchart, made to De Méras.

CHAPTER XX.

ONE morning Lucie had hardly got out of bed than she took down the calendar and began to consult it studiously, counting the days on her fingers. Hector, very much puzzled at this proceeding, asked Lucie for an explanation of it. Blushing up to the whites of her eyes, she refused at first to answer, seized, as she sometimes was, with one of those inexplicable fits of modesty which contrasted singularly with her looseness of morals.

She stood there, rather shamefaced, looking at the calendar which had just revealed to her a secret well calculated to perplex her.

"Whose on earth can it be?" she murmured, rubbing her forehead. She approached the bed where Hector was stretching his arms and yawning prodigiously. "What should you say, Hector, if I was enceinte?"

"Enceinte! you? It isn't true," cried De Méras, sitting up, his face beaming. "Enceinte!" he repeated; "you really mean it? You're not joking?"

"Then, you're not sorry?"

"It's silly to joke like that."

"Oh, very well, I swear it's so," replied Lucie, enchanted at the effect produced and which she was far from expecting.

Hector leaped out of bed. "My darling little wife!" he cried, kissing her affectionately, "you're an angel. Only a child was wanting to make my happiness complete, and you give me one!"

His eyes beamed, and in the excitement of his joy he clapped his hands, as pleased as a baby. After all, it was always so. It was in vain to adore one another when lovers, the brats never came ; but one was no sooner married than it was a case. They would call him Hector.

“Or else Oscar,” thought Lucie.

She must be very careful now, for he wanted a son, and a splendidly made son. The boys had always come first in his family. Lucie, rather amazed at this extravagant joy, was trying to recall the circumstances and reviewing the last few weeks, now inclining to Blaizinot, now to Hector ; but the latter finally triumphed in her mind as the authentic father. Blaizinot had neglected her so during that little fool Irma’s time !

In his delight at possessing an heir shortly, De Méras, the greedy De Méras, did not even reflect that his wife’s state would keep her behind the scenes for two months at least, and that during that time the five hundred francs a night would not be forthcoming.

“Now, you know, your health before all, my dear. So much the worse for the fees ; we must make that up afterwards.”

He went so far as to entreat her to inform him directly she felt the least ill, and to leave off acting immediately if by chance she experienced the slightest fatigue. Lucie failed to understand this increase of affection on the part of her husband, not being able to distinguish perfectly the real cause of this fatherly solicitude in which she only half believed.

The fact was that, entirely devoted to her actor, she had not had time to penetrate to the depths of De Méras’s heart, and to discover there where he kept them concealed the tortures and uneasiness which Blaizinot’s ever-increasing intrusion into his house caused him. It was in vain that Hector had monopolized Lucie by marrying her ; could he

prevent her who, after all, carried all his fortune with her, from one day escaping from the house and leaving him discomfited?

There was more than one celebrated case of these pranks on the part of actresses, who, having rid themselves of troublesome husbands, were scouring Europe and America in company with a lover who imposed upon them no less impudently than their rightful showman, but with this great merit, that they had no legitimate hold on them. So when he was gloomy he saw before him a future full of privations, of wounded self-esteem, and of new conquests to be attempted, with all the cruel uncertainty attaching to these treacherous connections. For these new loves could not well be as fruitful as the old ones, for this excellent reason, that his marriage, little as it had restricted his freedom, had sadly impaired his attractiveness.

But the birth of a child altered matters completely. A living bond of union between Lucie and himself, the little thing would increase the prerogatives of the husband by those of the father; Hector had a hold on his wife, and he had a feeling that she might make a good mother. It was the consecration of the husband through paternity, and now that his duel had cleared his honour, he would have nothing more to wish for.

To be sure there was always that dark spot on the horizon, Blaiziot, who, like a drop of oil, was gradually extending his sphere. But since this mountebank had become a constant frequenter of the house, De Méras fancied he noticed in him certain mental peculiarities which could only spring from two causes—possibly combined: love of drink, and Lucie's excessive passion for Oscar. Hector was clear-sighted enough soon to acquire the certainty that it was to the latter cause that the growing weakness of Blaiziot's mental faculties must be attributed. He had remarked that these

attacks, which were as yet only passing, almost always took possession of Lucie's lover on the conclusion of these long tête-à-têtes with the young woman, and coincided with the distortion of his features, a noticeable dimness in his eyes, and a general collapse of his whole frame. So he took good care not to interfere in the slightest degree with the loves of the actor and Lucie. He only asked them not to make them too public, which would have led to their discontinuance; with the exception of this essential restriction, he would himself have almost thrown them at every instant into one another's arms.

One day at the theatre, as he was walking along a corridor, he fancied he heard through the half-open door the sound of kisses in his wife's dressing-room. He pushed the door open at once and found himself face to face with Blaizinot, who was seated on a chair holding Lucie in his arms, in full costume and ready to appear on the stage.

"Oh, my children!" he cried; "shut yourselves in, at least! Just think; if anyone else but me had come in!"

And he discreetly withdrew, carefully closing the door behind him. The Blaizinots were now in an excellent position, pecuniarily; De Méras, who had finally yielded to Lucie's entreaties, allowed the mother one thousand francs a month, and the son two thousand. Moreover, Oscar having repeatedly complained of the distance which separated the Faubourg Saint-Denis from the Rue La Boétie, Lucie had thought for an instant of offering to lodge him in the house; but at the first mention of it Hector was furious.

Oh, utterly impossible! What would strangers say! One could not defy public opinion to that point! Lucie did not insist; she saw she had gone too far. After all, Hector did not object to the Blaizinots coming and living in the neighbourhood; this nearness of Oscar, on the contrary, fell in with his views, and he himself suggested to

Lucie that she might take apartments for the actor close by.

“What an excellent idea!” cried Lucie. “That will come to exactly the same thing, and no one will have anything to say.” And throwing her arms round De Méras’s neck: “It’s charming, now,” said she; “we never have a scene together.”

“What’s the good of it?” replied Hector philosophically.

It was Lucie’s intention that Oscar alone should inhabit the nest which she was preparing to line after her own fashion: but the actor having declared in grandiloquent phrases that she wanted to separate a son from his mother, and that he would never consent to move except on the condition that “the author of his being” should follow him, Lucie had an extra room furnished for the old woman.

The Blaizinots began by taking their meals at home; but soon the disgust at breakfasting and dining far from her beloved decided Lucie to invite him and his mother evening and morning, and from thence forward Hector sat at table between mother and son. These repasts were none the sadder on that account; on the contrary, for mamma had always some good stories to tell at dessert, with her comical air of frank simplicity. Lucie called her “aunt” as bold as brass, and Hector, who immensely enjoyed the ludicrousness of the improvised relationship, finally adopted it himself. The house became quite patriarchal. De Méras was a model nephew, handing his aunt a chair, offering her his arm to take her into the drawing-room, and complimenting her on her toilets which, thanks to Lucie’s allowance, were now very rich and in almost the latest fashion.

The mother’s influence increased. It was “aunt” who ordered the purchase of linen, wood or charcoal for the winter, as well as the provisions; it was she who had the sole superintendence of the cellar and settled the bill of fare

every morning. "Mistress's aunt" had grand conferences with the *chef*, discussing the way to season such and such a dish, suggesting ideas for sauces, and ordering him to make certain sweetmeats for her and also for her poor son, whose stomach was becoming more and more delicate.

The stomach was not the actor's only weak point. His senses were taking leave of him, and that quickly. At table, now, he did not utter a word, but sat with his nose almost in his plate. He no longer related, like he had done two or three months before, lolling on Lucie's sofas, what difficulty he had had in getting on in the world. With what scornful vanity he would then scoff at his comrades who had not succeeded as he had, and were sticking at their salaries of two hundred and fifty francs a month. It was only fools who were short of money, and he cheerfully recalled, with an upstart's pride, the time of his past misery. Now he ascended and descended the stairs, worn to a shadow, with heavy steps, very weak on his legs, his head lolling on his chest, his look vacant. He remained whole afternoons rolled up in an arm-chair, his eye dull, in a state of complete prostration, only exhibiting the slightest sign of life at Lucie's expressive clasp of the hand as she breathed into his ear some suggestive expression in which she alluded to their meeting of the day before or that which followed.

Soon came the crisis, and he had to remain in bed several days, a prey to attacks of delirium, during which he insulted everyone—his mother, Lucie, Hector, the servants, but Lucie, perhaps, more than any of the others. The doctor advised the South, and an engagement for Lucie Guépin at Nice and Monte Carlo was talked about. But before anything had been settled, he grew worse and had to be taken to Sainte-Aune; he was mad.

It was a profound grief to Lucie to be so abruptly parted from her Blaiziot. During a week, with the exception of

the evenings when she was obliged to perform at the theatre, she shut herself up in her room, refusing to see anyone, treating Hector coolly, and remaining for hours together with her "aunt," in whose company she extolled the good qualities of the poor darling one. Fortunately her accouchement was approaching, and the birth of her child, a fine boy, changed the current of her ideas and perhaps prevented her from falling ill.

She passed in a few days from a state of the most profound grief to one of lively hope, and it was a great joy to her, when she got up after twelve or fifteen days' absolute rest, to seize her child in her arms and devour it with kisses, in a rather theatrical outburst of maternal affection. She conceived on the spot a complete scheme of education—with a governess till the age of seven, a tutor to that of twelve, a very advanced university education; science, letters, law, medicine. Her son should be capable of anything, should be a Phoenix.

She wished to suckle him, but De Méras opposed it. Her acting before all! And besides, it spoils one's figure! She did not persist, knowing that business had its claims, and the doctor had said that she had not enough milk for the child. They got hold of a nurse with a plentiful supply, and a very few days after the confinement Hector had the satisfaction of seeing Lucie's name on the bills again. Blaizinot was chosen as honorary godfather, and "aunt" as godmother. They christened the little one Hector-Oscar—an idea of Lucie's. In that way he belonged a bit to every one, the dear baby!

The first joys of maternal love having cooled down a little, Lucie thought of Blaizinot, and decided to go and see him at Sainte-Anne. But there a cruel deception awaited her. Oscar did not recognize her. So she only remained for an instant with him and left the asylum hurriedly, quite over-

come by his madman's look. This visit left a horribly painful impression on her, which she tried to banish as quickly as possible from her mind. She threw her doors wide open again and invited her old friends, reproaching them for their indifference. Kolbach made his appearance again, more loving than ever, and, as before, taking the greatest precaution to avoid being seen by the husband.

Dorneval, too, suddenly enriched by a lucky speculation on the Bourse, in which he had allowed Lucie to have a share, had also his hour in the day for visiting the "diva." Anatole Pipert and Robert Mimès were requested by Guépin to read their latest work to her, which she had at once put into rehearsal at the Folies-Parisiennes. At the same time she informed Jarly that in future she would only consent to act in pieces to which these gentlemen contributed. A few long séances in her olive drawing room with the authors, in their respective turns, had at last made her understand all the merit of their collaboration. Jarly, too, was an assiduous visitor, hoping, and not without a chance of success, to renew the scene of the *Maison d'Or*. Séphano and D'Estrelles themselves had sought the singer's intimacy and had met with a most promising reception.

Lucie, her heart a blank, was endeavouring to distract her thoughts. She accepted now almost proudly all the bouquets and presents which were sent to her dressing-room, opened the notes, answered them—if they were worth it—and showed herself on every occasion a good-natured girl, accessible to all. De Méras looked on impassively at this mania for distraction, taking good care to raise no obstacles, and still less to venture on the slightest remonstrance with his wife. He did not even set foot now behind the scenes at the Folies-Parisiennes, and it was long since that, having one day surprised Oscar, who was mounting guard

outside Lucie's dressing-room when she was shut in with one of the Mirliton's men, he had walked up to him and said with a sneer :

"You're playing a nice part here, sir !"

Everything now which helped to keep Lucie away from Blaizinot delighted him. He did not fear them, all these millionaires, who showered a beneficent stream of gold on the house ; Lucie was ready enough to toy with them, but as for loving them, far from it ! They were not actors ! And besides, would it ever enter the head of one of these men, who adored her for the look of the thing, to elope with his wife, and gallivant about the provinces in company with the celebrated actress ? He no longer even feared to be reproached with trading on his wife's honour, for he had a mistress, Madame Béchart, a mistress who did not cost him a sou, but whose openly avowed love sufficed henceforward to justify to the full the indifference which he affected with regard to Lucie's misconduct.

This fresh passion the handsome Juliette had carried by assault under the orders of her astute husband, and their first kisses had been exchanged in that house at Colombes which witnessed Lucie's marriage, and where the two new lovers had treated themselves during a week to the illusions of a first love. The under-secretary's reward was speedy, and three weeks after this cloudless honeymoon, Béchart, on his birthday, had found under his napkin the letter informing him of his nomination to a chief-secretaryship.

A lady who did not view Lucie's conduct with so much indulgence as De Méras, was the "aunt." Madame Blaizinot, still a constant frequenter of the house, was in a perpetual ferment. Every time a brougham stopped at the gate and the bell rang, she rushed out and stood on the steps, awaiting the visitor firmly, throwing a furious look on him, and feeling inclined to bar his passage and to throw him from

the top of the flight into the court-yard below. All this amorous crew was a reproach to her poor child, with their sugared words and hands full of costly gew-gaws. Directly they had entered, she paced the house like a fury, stamped on the boards, slammed the doors purposely, sent the servants on trifling errands to Lucie, and only became calm on the intruders' exit. Then she ran up to Guépin's room, and in a voice choked with sobs, swinging her arms, her eyes bolting out of her head, accused her of being a traitress. Could not she quietly await Oscar's cure, more especially as she had a husband, without degrading herself with dandies? After all, if her son was at Sainte-Anne, whom had he to thank for it, if not Lucie, who had turned his brain? Ah! she longed but for one expiation, that the day when the darling left there he should take to himself another mistress. The ungrateful creature would come and entreat him on her bended knees then, but it would be too late! In the evening, hardly had she entered the actress's dressing-room than she trampled on the bouquets, threw them out of the window, and tore up the billets-doux. Once even, in a fit of rage, she had broken a bracelet of brilliants which an admirer in the stalls had sent her.

The recriminations of her "aunt" exasperated Lucie in reminding her of that brute of an Oscar, who had not even recognized her. So she plunged more deeply into the vortex, and consented to some fresh appointment. She emerged from it, her nerves overstrung, feeling a want of pure affection, from which her son profited. She snatched him out of his nurse's arms and held him for hours, kissing his lips, his eyes, his back, his little rosy thighs, and plump calves, without remembering that, a few minutes before, her lips had been clinging to those of a man with the same ardent tenderness. Ah! how she would have liked him to be bigger already, little Hector-Oscar, to take him to the

Bois in her carriage, or else to seat him in a stall on an armchair and act to him alone. And when he should have come to an age of reason, she would look after his morals, for on emerging from these orgies of prostitution to which she delivered herself up almost mechanically—looking at them as a necessary accompaniment of her profession—she felt an irresistible desire to preach to someone.

One evening Blaizinot died at the asylum in an outburst of furious madness.

“Ah! that’s just it, I loved him too much!” said Lucie carelessly, when they told her the news.

As for De Méras, he nearly went mad too, but from joy. The next morning, on his orders, everything which had belonged to the mountebank disappeared out of the house; he expelled his “aunt,” giving her an indemnity; then approaching the cradle and looking delightedly at Lucie’s son, who henceforward made his future safe, he cried with a smile:

“At last! I’m the only master in her house now!”

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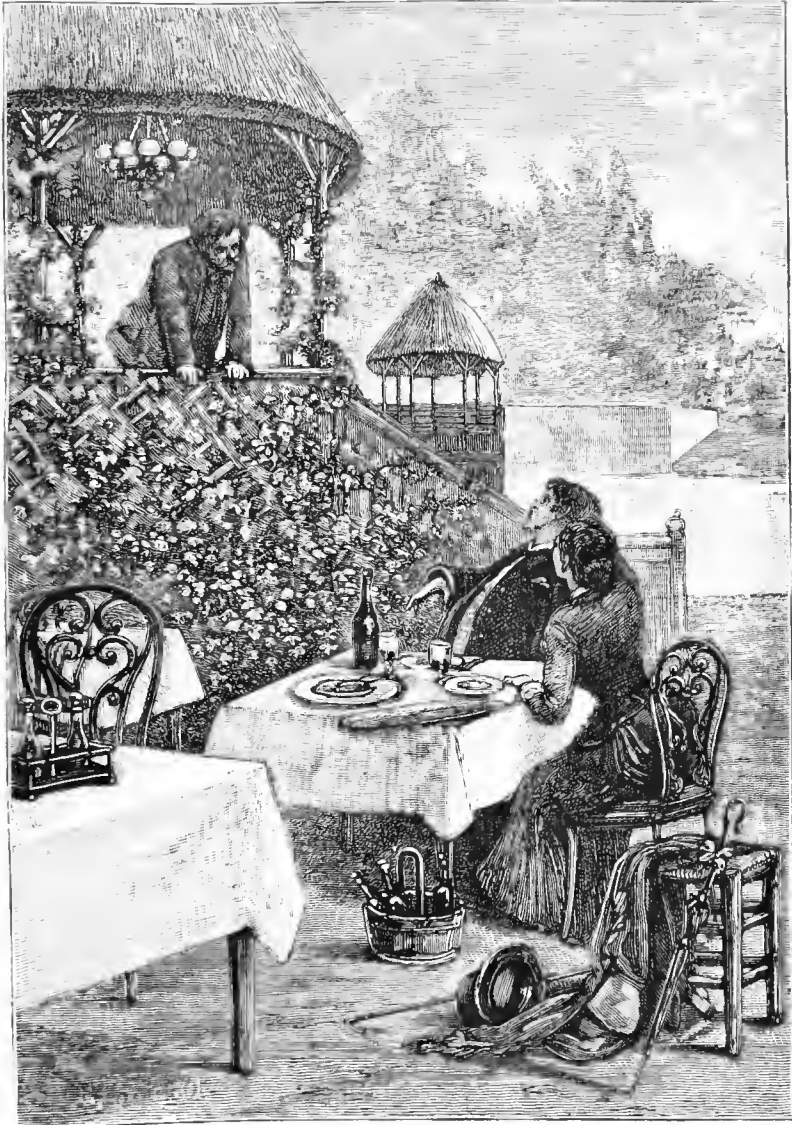
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